Words of Warning

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Archive Warning:	Graphic Depictions Of Violence
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Characters:	Will Graham, Hannibal Lecter, Beverly Katz, Freddie Lounds
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Summary

Will is a self-isolated writer, having a good amount of books to his name, and a loyal following of fans. His mind is wrought with images of horror, which he pours into words and pages of his books. He doesn't like the publicity aspect of his work, and he won't like it at all when an actual killer takes an interest in him.

Fic Playlist: https://open.spotify.com/playlist/2DXnvZAH1c5qTTTIHSSHVL?si=iAb89WwmQBOUinY94JR3pg

Chapter 1

Will's fingers danced over the keys of his laptop, words spilling over the page of his document as fast as his fingers could work. He had been in a rut recently, writer's block a plague he had been trying to cure. He had taken nearly a week off of writing all together due to his mental exhaustion, and now the words were flowing again.

He sipped from his coffee, one hand continuing to type as the other was occupied. It was something he hadn't intended to learn to do, but had become necessary, and actually came easier than he had expected. He could easily switch between typing with both hands to just one, either hand equally as adept at the task as the other. Typing with one hand was a tad slower than with both, but it kept his velocity going when he needed to eat or drink.

Will's phone rang, and he sighed, picking up the phone and only checking the number before turning his eyes back to the screen of his computer. He tucked the phone to his ear with his shoulder, continuing to type as he answered.

"Will Graham speaking," He said, his tone the flatly socially acceptable one he had tailored to keep from insulting people.

"The hermit prodigy lives," Beverly said, a smile evident in her voice, "I haven't heard from you in days."

Will hummed, dividing his attention between his typing and the conversation. Another skill he had learned by necessity.

"Well, I just got going again. I talked to you on Thursday, which is more recent than usual. Did something interesting happen, or are you just trying to interrupt the flow of words?"

Beverly chuckled, clearly amused and able to hear the clack of the keys as fast as a machine gun.

"I was just calling to make sure you remember your book signing at the public library on Wednesday," She said, "You know, I feel like I should get paid to keep you up to date on all your own events."

Will cursed loudly, his fingers tripping momentarily so he had to backspace about a dozen spaces to redo what he had messed up.

"I hate book signings," He told her, entirely aware she already knew as much.

Beverly snorted in an undignified manner. Not that she cared. She brushed off other people's opinions as easily as dust off her shoulder.

"I know, pretty boy, but you made a commitment. You skip out too much, and I'm making you go to this one if I have to drag you out of your house by those luscious curls of yours."

Will huffed unhappily. Beverly was a great friend, which was irritating more often than Will cared to admit. He would have been perfectly content without someone to remind him how to be a person, though of course he would have many more problems that he would elect to ignore until something blew up in his face.

"What do you think I'm expected to wear? Do I have to talk to people? Am I allowed to be a little bit drunk? I hate signings," Will moaned, abandoning his attempts to divide his attention now. He pulled his hands away from the keyboard and rubbed one over his face.

Beverly snickered.

"I'll come over the day before to make sure you're not going to make a fool of yourself," She promised, "And absolutely *no* alcohol. I swear to god if you drink a drop before going to the library I will personally scalp you and sell your curls to some poor, bald child."

Will wasn't sure when her obsession with his hair had started, but it continued to unnerve him. Especially when she said things like that.

"Okay, I get it," he grumbled, heading into the kitchen to pour himself some whiskey. It wasn't even Tuesday yet. "No getting drunk before I interact with the public in a professional capacity. Anything else I need to be aware of that I may or may not have forgotten already?"

Beverly hummed in thought, probably not even having anything written down for reference. She relied mostly on her memory for important dates and such. Will had to leave notes for himself everywhere unless he forget to eat regular meals.

"I'm going to take you out for lunch on Thursday," She decided, "You don't get out enough, and I need to make sure you get some real food into you at some point."

Will grunted, knowing he wouldn't be able to win the argument about cup noodles and canned ravioli being real food.

"I'm not a child, Bev," he said, though he knew the words lacked strength.

"I know," Bev replied, "but you do happen to be my friend, and friends need to look out for each other. Remember who helped me get through college?"

Will rolled his eyes, leaning against his kitchen counter and taking a long drink of his whiskey. He might not have been good at socializing, or remembering the dates of important events that would include socializing, but he had always done well academically. He had even kept track of all the assignments Beverly was supposed to be doing.

And now she felt for some reason that she owed him, meaning she took it upon herself to keep him on track and not ruin his public image.

"Alright. Lunch on Thursday," Will agreed, "signing on Wednesday. Then, I need to just get set down and write like the wind."

"What, you coming up on a deadline?" Beverly asked.

“Nah, you know how it is, I just need to get the ideas down on paper before they escape,” He answered, “I do have a manuscript I want to get to the publishers as soon as possible, but I have to get it to the editors first.”

Beverly made an affirmative sound.

“Alright, don’t work too hard, pretty boy,” she said, “and don’t forget I’m coming over on Wednesday to get you ready for the signing.”

“Already forgot,” Will replied, “see you then.”

Will downed the last of his whiskey and set the glass down on the counter before he headed back to his desk. He made sure there were some crackers and a granola bar next to his laptop, as well as his stack of notebooks in case he needed them.

Will was not the best at taking care of himself, but he was always working on making it easier. He bought pre-prepared food, water bottles so he didn’t have to worry about spilling on his computer or notebooks, and he kept them near his work station so he could put nourishment into his body without having to stop working. It wasn’t necessarily the best set up, but it had worked for him for a while now, so he kept at it.

“Alright, what do we have to work with?” Beverly said, rubbing her hands together in anticipation.

Will shrugged, waving over his shoulder to where the door to his bedroom was. He hadn’t slept the night before, being tight in the grasp of inspiration, and he was still typing like a man possessed as Beverly tried to convince him to get ready for the book signing.

“You know where I keep my clothes. Go wild,” he said distractedly, “just not so wild I look like some sort of freak when I go out. I have some kind of image to uphold, after all.”

Beverly was clearly not impressed with him. He could feel her disapproving glare as she headed down the hall toward his room. Will only noticed in his periphery, though he would remember later and feel bad about it. He tended to have delayed reactions while he was working, at least when it came to conversational things.

Will wet his lips habitually, realizing in the back of his mind that they were slightly chapped. He filed that away for later as he continued typing faster than a hundred words per minute.

“What about this?” Beverly said, emerging from his room with a set of clothes in hand.

Will finished a paragraph and glanced over his shoulder briefly before turning back to his work.

She was holding a dark green buttoned shirt and black slacks, displaying them as if she worked in some high-end boutique for a living. Will sometimes wondered where she had learned everything she knew, but he typically came to the same decision.

Being social gave you more experiences in life than being a self-proclaimed hermit.

"It's just at a library," Will said, "I didn't think I was meeting the president or anything."

Beverly huffed.

"You know people are going to take pictures of you," she pointed out, "and I think you should make an effort to look nice. I heard a rumor Freddie Lounds is going to be there too, so you need to seem as normal as possible."

Will cursed, taking his hands off the keyboard in order to rub them over his face. He was starting to feel the effects of sleep loss, and he only had about an hour before he needed to be somewhat social.

"You know, if there weren't real serial killers out there, I'd tell Lounds exactly what would happen to her in one of my books," Will grumbled, making sure everything was saved before he locked his computer and closed it up.

Beverly laughed.

"I'd love to see her face as you describe how her insides would look on her outside, but I agree it's inadvisable. Don't want to have people like me investigating you over something like that," she said.

Will stood up and took the clothes from her, smiling in thanks as best he could. He headed to his room to change, wondering how much coffee he would have to drink in order to avoid murdering the first reporter he saw that day.

Beverly worked in the FBI, something Will had wanted at some point. He had been identified as unstable, so hadn't gotten in, but everything he had learned on his journey there had come in handy in his career as an author. He'd had quite a few people terrified when he talked to them about the curious way just a few feet difference vastly changed the rate of decomposition in a human body.

2

Look who's doing a signing at the library right now!

The exclamation was paired with a picture that had clearly been taken without the subject's knowledge. The man sat at a folding table in what appeared to be a library. He was surrounded by stacks of books that he seemed to be wanting to hide behind, much like the glasses perched on his nose.

Hannibal felt as if he recognized the man, but it wasn't immediately turning up in his thoughts.

Hannibal checked the notes and hashtags of the post, looking for the bit of information that was escaping him.

Will Graham.

Now Hannibal remembered.

Will Graham was a *beautiful* mind. An author with the ability to conjure up the most macabre masterpieces Hannibal had ever had the pleasure of reading. Hannibal did not often read the more modern literature, but he had picked Graham's first novel up out of curiosity. The words Will used were fantastic and brilliant, painting images so vibrant and realistic that Hannibal would have even considered that the man had experienced them all firsthand.

Death and mutilation were the common themes of his writing, garnering him attention in the cult and horror groups, as well as a smattering of other avid readers with strong stomachs, or a taste for gore.

Hannibal was decidedly other, finding himself drawn to the books for what he liked to think were artistic reasons.

Hannibal found inspiration in the pages of the novels that seemed to absolutely pour from the man's mind.

Hannibal had never been witness to something so phenomenally different. Will Graham was unique in a way Hannibal had only ever dreamt of, wishing to find it in someone so he might have the opportunity to touch the beauty of such a thing.

Perhaps today was his lucky day.

Will Graham hadn't been to a signing or public event in nearly two years. Hannibal was usually extremely talented at tracking people down, but it was as if Will had managed to erase himself from public records and the public eye.

There was a smattering of blurry pictures taken by cell phones when some avid fan thought they had seen him in public. The problem was that none of them could really be confirmed to

be him, and they popped up in wildly different areas, as if he was somehow travelling across the continent constantly. Hannibal very much doubted they were all Graham, but it would be a fair enough assumption to think at least one may have been.

The only clear picture of the man Hannibal had ever seen was the one on the inside cover of the books. It hadn't changed since the man had published his first book, and Hannibal was confident he must look different now than he had then. He had begun writing while in college, and had published his first book immediately after. It had been too long for him to look the same. The boyish, bright eyed young man in the dust cover of the books was certainly long gone.

If Will Graham was at a signing at this moment, Hannibal wanted to be there too.

Hannibal quickly tracked the location of the post, grinning when he found the author of the post, and by extent the sly photographer, was currently at the Baltimore public library. It was nearby. Hannibal even had a few hours to spare just then.

Will Graham clearly hadn't worn the glasses solely for vision enhancement. Hannibal was debating whether or not he actually needed them, but it was clear he mostly used them to aid in avoiding eye contact. If he did truly need them, contacts would be a much more practical decision for someone with hair long enough to become tangled in the hinges, and sweat causing them to fog periodically.

Hannibal watched from his periphery as he pretended to browse a shelf of mystery novels. He had no intention, truly, of approaching the man that day. He did not want to be remembered by him in case they "happened" upon each other sometime later.

Graham smiled for only flashes each time a new fan walked up to the table where he sat, seemingly unable to keep the expression for long. He was polite, but curt, clearly fighting with himself to even be that.

It was fascinating.

For a man who was so capable of creating characters that interacted normally with each other and naturally socialized, the man himself didn't seem to know quite what to do with himself.

As time moved forward, Hannibal moving around to avoid being caught watching, Graham's cheeks gained a pink tint that almost would be unnoticeable under the layer of scruff he maintained. It appeared he was not comfortable being the center of attention. Hannibal did not hear a single person with anything negative to say about either the books or their unsocial author. It seemed as if everyone were enchanted by him, regardless the extent of their interaction with him.

A familiar face appeared, and Hannibal internally winced.

Franklyn Froideveaux.

Hannibal had heard Franklyn gush about Will Graham for hours upon hours, but had foolishly forgotten him the moment he had seen the post saying Graham was doing a signing.

Hannibal ducked out of sight, not keen to have his patient make a scene that would not only be remembered, but likely also recorded and posted online if the numerous phones and cameras being held were anything to go on.

Hannibal pitied Graham for a moment as he watched the obsessive man approach the table.

Then, he was curious. He wanted to see how this fantastic mind dealt with someone of the disposition Franklyn was. He was almost grateful, for a moment, that Franklyn was there, so he could watch.

Franklyn, thankfully, managed to wait his turn. He bounced on his feet with nervous excitement, peeking around the others in line to catch sight of Will Graham before he was meant to see him fully.

Graham took one look at Franklyn, signed a book with a rapid flick of his wrist, and shoved it into the waiting hands.

"Thank you for reading my work, please move along. I'm not answering questions today," Graham said sharply, waving Franklyn away.

Franklyn, miracle of miracles, was speechless.

The woman standing near the table stepped forward and nearly removed him with bodily force. Franklyn stared at Will Graham as he was ushered away, and the woman shot Graham a look of concern and soft reprimand. Hannibal wondered exactly what kind of relationship she had with the author, as she didn't look like someone who would be hired to protect a celebrity. Not that Will Graham necessarily qualified as such.

Before he knew it, Franklyn was out of the building, and Will Graham had returned to signing books with polite smiles. It was stunning, and Hannibal wanted to find out what had prompted the sudden change of demeanor. Aside from the obvious avoidance of an annoying man, that is.

As Hannibal continued to watch, pretending to read a few pages from a variety of books in order to maintain his cover as a regular library patron, he grew more infatuated with the author.

Will Graham was wearing a forest green shirt that made his curls look all the more silky and dark. The few times Hannibal had been able to catch glimpses of the man's eyes, he saw that they were vibrantly colored, though he couldn't be sure if they were blue or green. Either way, the shade of the shirt accentuated the bright and intelligent gaze. Graham hardly looked up at the people who walked up to compliment his imagination, but when he did he seemed to cut directly to their core with his perception.

"How do you think it all up?" one woman couldn't help from asking as he signed her book.

Graham grimaced, though he turned his head further down to hide the expression from her.

“Imagination is both a blessing and a curse,” he answered smartly, snapping the book shut and plastering a smile to his face to hand it back to her, “have a nice day.”

The woman frowned in confusion, but nodded and wished him a good day in return, walking quickly to the door and heading out to the parking lot.

The woman next to Graham leaned down and seemed to whisper some chastisement into his ear, because he sighed heavily and smiled even more brightly to the next fan, though the expression was obviously forced.

“This is for my sister,” The young woman explained, handing a book to him for his signature, “I don’t really understand all that horror stuff, but she can’t get enough of it.”

Will nodded, huffing a soft laugh to himself.

“It’s certainly not easy to stomach. Anything you want me to say to her?” he asked, the first time he had offered a personalized message, despite having written some for those who had asked.

The girl grinned brightly, seemingly elated that he would ask.

“Could you tell her she’s brilliant?” The girl asked, “she wants to be a criminal profiler, but she’s really anxious. I know she would feel so much better about herself if you did.”

Will nodded, a stray curl falling against his glasses.

“And her name?” he asked, touching his pen to his tongue before he hovered it above the inside cover of the book.

“Oh, yeah. Her name’s Sage. I can’t thank you enough, Mister Graham,” the girl said.

Graham’s smile took on a more genuine turn as he actually made eye contact with the girl, handing the book to her and brushing the hair away from his eyes.

“Call me Will,” he said, “and tell Sage I’m sure the world will be much safer with her out there helping catch criminals.”

The young woman beamed at him and thanked him profusely before turning and sprinting out of the library, likely thrilled to show the gift to her sister.

That was curious. Will Graham hadn’t been that friendly with any fan up to that point, and yet he had almost acted *familiar* with that girl. Hannibal wondered why that might be.

3

Will was feeling incredibly drained by the time they were nearing the end of the signing. He had been bursting with inspiration for the last half hour, but hadn't had a break to even scribble any of the ideas down on his arm, let alone in a notebook.

Beverly had been upset with him after the annoying man, but he hadn't had the energy to explain why he absolutely was not going to apologize to either her or the man.

That man was extremely obsessive, and Will had known the moment he had set eyes on him that engaging in any type of conversation would spell doom for his social battery. There was only one way to deal with the man, and that was to get him to leave as quickly as possible.

Now, there was another man that was making Will simultaneously concerned and intrigued. He had been skirting around the building, always remaining within eyesight, and careful not to appear as if he were watching the slow procession of people up to the table. Will wasn't sure if he was a bashful fan or a stalker, or just an oblivious bystander who was curious to find out what all the fuss was about.

Sucks to be him, if that last one was the case. Will was sure he would be disappointed to find out it was all to do with a man who couldn't even be bothered to leave his house most days unless it was to buy more whiskey or instant coffee. A man who hated eye contact and dressing up. A man who shrank from physical touch like it was the plague.

Yeah, the guy in a tailored three piece suit would definitely be disappointed if he knew anything about Will Graham.

The final book was signed, and the final fan well on their way. Will sighed heavily, earning a curious glance from the librarian sitting behind the desk.

The man was nowhere to be seen. Will hadn't noticed when he had disappeared, but it was somewhat of a relief to think he wouldn't try catching Will after the crowd was gone, ambushing him despite Beverly's presence.

"Thanks for being here, Bev," Will said, standing up and stretching, his entire body sore from the stress he had been holding in his muscles.

Beverly grinned, taking a stack of leftover books from the table and heading toward the door with Will doing the same.

"Of course, princess," she said, "what are friends for, if not to act as a stand-in bodyguard to keep the creeps away?"

Will laughed, feeling some of the anxiety leaving his body. Beverly was the only person who really didn't make him nervous about himself. He always worried about how he appeared to others, but he never felt judged by Bev.

“Speaking of which,” Will said sheepishly, “sorry about that one guy. I know it’s weird, but I could just tell he has an obsessive personality. He’s already obsessed with my books, and giving him a moment of my time would have encouraged him to become obsessed with me, or *more* obsessed, I guess.”

Beverly stopped at the trunk of her car, casting a worried glance to Will as she opened it and dropped the books in.

“I know you have that weird empathy thing,” Beverly said, frowning deeply, “but are you sure about that? He seemed pretty harmless to me.”

Will sighed, setting his own stack of books in the trunk next to the others.

“He mostly is,” Will agreed, “but you know how I get when I have to be social. If this guy started getting obsessed with me, I wouldn’t be able to escape him. He would find things out. He would basically become a stalker. I don’t need another one of those right now.”

Beverly nodded, shutting the trunk and sighing in sympathy. She was most likely the only person who actually believed Will when he told her he had an empathy disorder. She had accepted it the first time he had told her, and hadn’t questioned it since. She would occasionally be skeptical about what he could realistically glean from his ability, but she never questioned whether he really had one.

“Alright,” Beverly said, “don’t forget I’m coming to get you for lunch tomorrow. Don’t be hungover either, because I refuse to reschedule.”

Will smiled wryly.

“I’ll do my best,” he agreed, “see you tomorrow.”

Beverly saluted to him before sliding into the driver’s seat of her car and pulling away. Will stood and watched, feeling a tickle of panic in the back of his mind at being in a public space without her protection. He knew it was unrealistic and unnecessary to be worried, but he always felt a bit jumpy when she left.

Will made his way back into the library to make sure he hadn’t left anything behind, and was approached by the librarian. She was blushing a bit, and seemed almost as anxious as he was. She held out a book to him, her hands trembling a bit. It was one of his own books, though one that had been well read already rather than the crisp new ones he had been signing that day. He would have recognized the picture on the front anywhere. A chair made of antlers.

“I’m sorry, mister Graham, I know I should probably have asked while you were still doing the signing, but I don’t like crowds of people, and you already looked stressed. I just-I have a niece who loves your books. She’s turning thirteen next week. If it wouldn’t be too much trouble…”

Will smiled, trying not to look as anxious as he felt. She was already worried, and didn’t need him to add to it.

“Of course,” he said, pulling his pen from his pocket and tapping the tip to his tongue once before meeting her eyes, “what’s her name?”

The librarian sighed in relief, her shoulders sagging as her muscles relaxed.

“Lily,” she breathed, “and she adores you. Thank you so much.”

Will smiled to himself, seeing the girl in his mind’s eye. She would have matching chestnut hair to the librarian, and large eyes. She must be smart to enjoy his writing, because he knew it was a pretty high reading level. Some adults didn’t even understand what he wrote sometimes.

Will wrote a short note to the girl, saying how much her aunt loves her and that he couldn’t wait to meet her someday.

He didn’t always write actual notes, settling for just a signature for most fans, but he had a soft spot for people who were getting it for someone else. He could always see how much they really loved the other person, and he couldn’t help but want to encourage that kind of affectionate gesture within families.

Beverly thought it was weird of him.

“Here,” Will said, handing the book back, “If I ever do a signing here again, feel free to bring your niece. I can tell she would enjoy it, and I don’t mind at all.”

The librarian had tears in her eyes as she clutched the novel to her chest and nodded.

“Thank you so much,” she said, “you have no idea what this means to me.”

Will suddenly felt much more awkward. He didn’t do crying. He didn’t know what to do with himself when others cried around him, and he always worried he was making it worse if he did anything.

The librarian, much to Will’s relief, smiled and thanked him once more before she headed back to her desk.

Will felt his muscles relax a bit and he quickly did a sweep of the main room to make sure there wasn’t anything of his left behind before he darted back out to the parking lot.

Once Will was safely in his car and on the road, he headed to get himself another cup of coffee. He was going to need it just so he would survive the drive back to Wolf Trap. He was grateful for the time it would take to drive back, because he would be able to record some notes of what had been swirling through his head the entire time he had been trapped in the library.

Will turned off onto the backroads that would take him to his home, pressing the record button on his phone, and began to dictate what he had been considering.

4

Will's dictations were more like bullet points than cohesive story. He was absolute crap at speaking, regardless of his skill in writing. He found that words flowed easily when he sat at a keyboard, a bit less so when he had a pen in his hand, and not at all when he opened his mouth. Whatever god had gifted him with the ability to write seemed to have taken his ability to tell stories as their payment.

But Will didn't mind that much. He was unsocial as it was, and he had taken to carrying several notebooks and hoards of pens with him if he was ever away from his computer. He had once used pencils exclusively, but an incident where broken graphite allowed an entire plot to slip through his fingers had cured him of that habit.

One thing Will had insisted on teaching himself was a sort of coded shorthand. After the first roaring success of one of his novels, he had come to the startling idea that someone might try to snag one of his notebooks from him. Whatever the intentions of such a person, Will hated the idea of someone reading a half-baked portion of one of his stories. Will had later been grateful for this bit of insight, and his preparations, because a few of his notebooks had been nabbed once, but swiftly returned when the fan found they had no way to make use of them.

Will had no such code for when he was forced to dictate notes, but they would be likewise unusable. His spoken thoughts were so disjointed and fragmented that they would make no sense to anyone but him, as they would jog his memory of exactly what his mind's eye had revealed to him when he made the note. Not to mention, someone would have to steal and unlock his phone to listen to them. That had never happened, and Will thought it unlikely that it ever would.

Will finally pulled up to his little house, almost concealed by trees. He slumped out of his car and pulled the keys out of his bag on his way up to the door. As a kid, Will had lived in a house once where the doorknob and the deadbolt had taken the same key. He had thought it was a bit stupid then, and the notion had never left. So, Will had two keys separated from the rest as he stood on the top step of his porch.

The house was too quiet, and Will again considered getting a dog. He loved dogs, but the way he managed to neglect his own health had half-convinced him that he would not be able to take care of a dog.

Maybe Beverly would send him daily reminders to feed and exercise a dog if he ever did decide to get one. She would grumble about having one more thing on her plate, but Will believed she actually enjoyed the opportunity to be her annoying self.

Will didn't even bother turning on the lights as he threw his bag onto a chair and made his way to the kitchen. He wanted some whiskey.

Will sat down with his tumbler, starting up his computer again and getting back to work. He played his recorded notes as he typed, his mind trotting along pleasantly. He wasn't yet at a frantic gallop, but he knew it was only a matter of time before something spooked the horse

that was inspiration and it would set off. That was how it usually went, though there had been times when the gunshot had ended up shooting the horse dead, and he had been thrown back into his chair, frustrated at his lack.

But inspiration death was a rare thing for Will. His head was always full to bursting with ideas and images, just waiting to be poured onto a page.

No, inspiration was not Will Graham's biggest problem. That honor was usually given to sleep loss and malnutrition. He very rarely slept, taking aspirin for the exhaustion headaches, and just pushing through until he eventually either collapsed or conceded.

When Will did sleep, the images from his waking thoughts became animated and alive, horrific in their beauty. Nightmares plagued him, and he often woke up in a cold sweat. This did not cause him to avoid sleeping, but it certainly did not endear him to the idea when he had work to do.

These things are what accompanied Will as he typed away all night, only stopping when the sun broke through the trees and sent a single beam down onto his hands.

Will blinked down at the light that was beginning to warm his skin, and realized how long he must have been working. Beverly would be angry if she found out, and since she was insisting on taking him to lunch, he was sure she would.

"That gives you a few hours to rest up," Will told himself, though his inner voice complained.

Or, we could continue writing. It's just getting good, and you know it's better to keep your velocity than try to pick it back up later.

Will shook his head.

"Nope. Sleep is important. I might be writing gibberish in this state and not even know it. Sleep."

With that, Will closed up his computer and stood up. He stretched, only then realizing he was sore from sitting for so long. He felt as if his body might just fall to ruin if he were left to his own devices. Beverly was the only thing keeping him alive, since he was clearly not doing a good job of that himself.

Will sighed and made his way to the bathroom and brushed his teeth before heading into his bedroom. He had never been able to sleep if he hadn't brushed his teeth, which he supposed was a small mercy, or his teeth may have rotted away due to his tendency to neglect himself.

The moment Will dropped onto his bed, still fully clothed, his eyes closed and darkness consumed him.

Meat hooks hung from the ceiling and the walls, each one dripping with blood despite the sterility of the rest of the room. The floor was white tile, hospital clean. The walls were a

light grey, but the lights were so dim they turned darker with every moment.

The slow, rhythmic dripping sounds from the blood weeping from the hooks was the only sound at first. The faint plinking was reminiscent of a scene in a film where a character ventured into the sewers or a dank catacomb. The lighting added to that illusion, shaky reflections dancing up and illuminating patches of the walls and ceiling in short flashes. Will expected it to be cold, just like the sewers or catacombs, but it was surprisingly warm, almost stifling.

The smell of the blood was the worst thing, filling the air with the scents of copper and rot. It crossed Will's mind that it would smell nice if the blood were fresh, and not yet on the way to decomposition. He had never considered that blood would rot on its own, outside of a body and the flesh.

The light dimmed further, making Will squint his eyes to try to see around the room. He wouldn't be able to move around the room if he couldn't see. The hooks alone were enough of a deterrent for him, not to mention the blood that must be pooling on the floor. Blood was damn slippery. Something Will knew, but didn't remember ever learning.

All at once, the brightness of the lights screamed to nearly blinding, and Will took an inadvertent step backward. As he did, he saw the horror the darkness had been concealing.

The hooks were not meat hooks. They were fishing lures, made with live creatures. On each hook was a wriggling, crying bird or squirrel, their feathers or fur creating the lure to attract prey to the hook with a dangerously sharp barb.

In Will's instinctive step back, he felt the sudden stab of sharp pain under his shoulder blades. He couldn't move around to look at whatever it was he had run into, but he could feel the shape of it in his flesh. He felt the barb and the tearing as he writhed in pain.

And Will was not the prey the lures were meant to attract. No, in that moment, he understood, he was another bait.

Will woke in his usual cold sweat, wondering what a lure like himself was meant to attract.

5

“Hey, Snow White,” Bev said, her teasing trying to conceal her worry, “You don’t look good. Did you sleep at all last night?”

Will, his inspiration galloping at breakneck speed, only barely turned his head, never taking his eyes away from the words appearing on his screen.

“I got about two hours this morning,” he replied, with the dull, frank honesty only apparent when he was in such a state of mind.

Beverly was predictably unimpressed, especially as she eyed the whiskey tumbler on the desk.

“You sound almost proud of that,” she accused, snooping around as if she might find some evidence of wrong-doing, “bad dreams?”

Will hummed in confirmation.

“One *Hell* of a nightmare,” he agreed, almost happily, “but it was also one hell of a good kick to get me going. I had a great idea for the one I’m working on right now, and it’s going to be good.”

Beverly huffed unhappily and dropped down into one of his armchairs. She knew better than to take the one next to the big bay window, since that was the chair designated for when Will needed to have a good line of sight into the woods while he worked. There had been quite a few books that had for some reason insisted on being written solely in that chair.

Beverly watched Will for a long few moments, her eyes sad. Will would later realize she probably felt as if she was watching him slowly kill himself.

Then, with the snap of her fingers, she stood back up and stalked over to Will.

“Time’s up,” she said sharply, putting her hand over the screen of his computer so he couldn’t see his own words, “I am taking you to lunch, and you are going to eat some real food if it kills me.”

Will huffed unhappily, typing out his last few words without being able to see them. He looked up at Bev, and felt the horse chuffing and stomping impatiently, eager to be set loose again.

“I had almost expected you to get called into the labs and have to cancel on me,” he said, and the thought truly had crossed his mind. It had passed behind his inspiration, on a parallel track, visible through the trees.

Beverly shook her head.

“Nope,” she said pleasantly, still holding one hand in front of the computer, “You aren’t getting rid of me that easily. Crime is slow right now, thankfully, so I have all the time in the world today to force you to take better care of yourself.”

Will sighed and nodded, accepting his fate.

“Okay, just let me shut the computer down properly. Then, I’ll get dressed and we can go,” he said.

Beverly allowed it, though she stood poised, as if at any moment he would set his fingers on the keyboard and take off again. Will wouldn’t lie and say that the temptation was not there.

Will dressed in his usual flannel and khakis, adding a cap for good measure. Along with his glasses, Will liked to wear a cap because he could almost entirely avoid making eye contact. He could bear going out into the world and behaving like a functional person, just so long as he didn’t have to make eye contact with anyone.

Beverly chose a Chinese restaurant, insisting that fast food would be just as bad as all the processed and packaged food he put into his body every other day. Will didn’t mind, glad at the prospect of actually *enjoying* some food for a change.

Beverly rolled her eyes when Will pulled out a notebook as soon as they sat at their table, and started writing with a speed that would have been feverish for anyone else. Will could write much faster when the horse was in a gallop.

Beverly didn’t really mind his obsessive writing, mostly because she knew what he was like if he couldn’t write. Will without a notebook(and/or inspiration) acted like a junkie on the verge of withdrawal. He would fidget nervously, his eyes darting around as if expecting to see a demon, and he could not hold a conversation for the life of him. Beverly had even caught him tracing words on the top of a table with the tip of his finger, as if the words needed to escape him and once they had been created outside his head it didn’t matter what happened to them.

So, when they got their food and Will immediately took up the chopsticks with his left hand, Beverly only barked out a sharp laugh and shook her head.

Will’s left hand had been forced to learn many things, as it wouldn’t write a single legible word. Just as he could type with either independent hand, almost everything he could do with his right hand could also be done with his left. So ingrained was his urge to be writing at every moment, that his non-dominant hand had a larger variety of tasks to perform daily than the dominant one.

One thing that Beverly truly admired about Will, though she never voiced it, was that he always remembered exactly where he had left off on any of his stories. He could alternate between the computer and his notebooks without missing a beat, the story fragments fitting together like pieces of a jigsaw. Beverly couldn’t even pick up a book she had been reading a moment ago and continue without going back and reading the previous paragraph.

“Graham, if this keeps up, I think you should see someone about this sleeping problem,” Beverly ventured after a while, her stern tone almost concealing the fact that she was really worried about him, “maybe you could get some sleeping pills or something?”

Will considered that as he chewed, his hand never hesitating in its scribbling. It was almost like his brain and his hand were not connected, and therefore his hand didn’t need to get instructions from it.

“You know,” he said, “That might just be the only kind of medication I’d be willing to try.”

Beverly raised an eyebrow at that.

“Oh?” she asked.

Will shrugged.

“I mean, they won’t be changing my brain chemistry, they would probably help with the dreams, and I wouldn’t have to take them every day, on a schedule. Just when I want to sleep. I don’t really see a downside.”

Beverly seemed to have mixed feelings about that. Will could see the conflict in her face.

“I don’t know if I should be glad you are thinking about getting help, or upset that it looks like you’re in it for the wrong reasons,” she said, confirming what Will had suspected, “But I guess I should be thankful you’re considering it at all.”

Will smiled absently

“Silver lining,” he said, “but considering it is a far cry from actually getting help. I’d have to have an idea of someone to see about it in the first place.”

At that, Beverly got a sly, smirking expression. It was as if she knew something Will didn’t, and she was about to use that to her advantage. Will was instantly curious, because it wasn’t often Beverly could keep a secret from him, and she rarely tried anymore because of it.

“I might just have someone in mind,” she said, “I’ve been talking to Alana about you recently, and she says she knows a guy. From everything she’s said, he sounds perfect. He sounds like the kind of guy who can keep a secret, and would see it as rude to go around blabbing about his famous patient. I think you should give him a try.”

Will frowned at her dubiously, his hand finally stilling completely with the pen loose in his grip. This was a very important conversation, and his mind had to focus entirely.

“So, what you’re saying is that you’ve been talking about me behind my back,” he surmised, “and with a psychiatrist no less?”

Beverly smiled sheepishly and offered him a shrug.

“I talk about you,” she agreed, “but you’re my best friend, so you signed up for that. I can’t help being worried about you, so occasionally it strays to the “behind your back” territory,

but only so I can get you some good, quality help. Alana is good at compartmentalizing, so it's not like I was talking to my therapist about you and trying to sell them on the idea of taking you on as well. And hell, Alana even told me she wouldn't be a good fit for you, because you'd be able to tell she's interested in figuring out what makes you tick almost as much as helping you. That makes me more confident that the guy she recommends can be trusted. If she can recognize her own bias and think around it, I trust her to know this guy well enough."

Beverly was defending her position admirably, apparently unaware that it was in no danger of being attacked. Will just smiled as she talked, enjoying the way passion gave color to her words. He had based more than one character in his books off of her, though taking different bits of her personality so they wouldn't be easy to identify. Only Beverly herself, and *maybe* someone who had it pointed out to them, would be able to lump the characters together based on the person who inspired them. Will was good at that, he believed.

"Sounds like you're ready to abduct me and throw me into the guy's office to get me to talk to him," Will mused, poking at his noodles with the chopsticks, still in his left hand despite the pen now laying dormant by his right.

Beverly laughed, again looking sheepish, but not backing down any.

"I just really think it's about time you talk to someone," she said, "And I've made sure I have who I think is the best option."

Will nodded, once again grateful to have Beverly in his life. She had kept him sane and relatively healthy his entire adult life. He trusted her more than himself most days.

"Alright, can I at least know the guy's name?" Will asked, feeling as if this might be the only thing he didn't yet know about the hypothetical psychiatrist.

Beverly smiled, nodded, and produced a crisp, cream colored business card. The paper it was printed on was nice, high quality, durable, and yet somehow soft. Will recognized impeccable taste and utmost care in the selection of this paper.

Doctor Hannibal Lecter, the card read, along with an address and business phone number. The print was elegant but legible, pretty but professional. Yes, the owner of that card, the owner of that name, must have an incredibly refined taste, Will believed.

"Hannibal Lecter," Will read aloud, liking the sound of it and wishing it didn't belong to this man, so he could use it in a book. The way the name rolled made it seem like it didn't quite belong in his slightly southern accent, but something again more refined, like the tastes of the man himself.

Will imagined the man, though no real physical features as of yet. The first thing he pictured was a red suit. Something tailored and tasteful. Italian leather shoes would no doubt pair with it, and a tie with some loud, ostentatious pattern on it. A cream colored shirt, perhaps. Each choice just a bit dangerous to better show that the subject could pull it off. Will imagined the man would be well educated, and would stand and speak as such. He would be careful not to

misspeak or take back anything he ever said, but would still say some admirably daring things. A man who could command a room with just his presence alone.

“Earth to Graham,” Beverly said, tipping her head and leaning forward a bit, “you still with me?”

Will blinked away these notions, deciding if he met the man he would know soon enough if any of it was accurate.

“Wool gathering,” he replied, “trying to picture the guy who belongs to a name like that.”

Beverly smiled slyly at him.

“Planning to add him to one of your books?” she asked.

Will shrugged.

“Mostly jealous that his parents thought up that name before I had the chance to,” he confessed, “you have to admit it’s one hell of a character name.”

Beverly nodded thoughtfully, and Will knew she did agree. She usually did when he talked about these things. He actually really appreciated that about her.

“Well, I’m sure you could make a character or two out of him, but you’d have to meet him first,” Beverly said, feigning innocence.

Will rolled his eyes and tucked the card into the pocket of his shirt. Now he really had to meet the guy, even if only to satisfy his own curiosity. He wanted to know what kind of characters could be picked out of his personality.

Probably not the way most people approach a psychiatrist, but Will knew that description didn’t often apply to him.

6

“I saw Will Graham the other day,” Franklyn said, excitement only partially masking his disappointment.

Hannibal didn’t visibly react to the statement, having already known that very well. He wasn’t sure where Franklyn meant to take this, but he would let it play out. He may even be able to learn something more about Graham through this conversation, if he played his cards very carefully.

“How fortunate for you,” Hannibal replied calmly, “how did it go?”

Now, Franklyn allowed himself to frown with his disappointment.

“Not as well as I had hoped,” Franklyn confessed, “I didn’t manage to say a word to him. I guess he was really busy.”

Hannibal nodded in understanding.

“How did it make you feel, to see him and not be able to say what you wanted to him?” he asked.

Franklyn smiled, but it was sad. He was trying not to focus on the bad thoughts. Hannibal could see the duality at war within the man.

“I felt like, if he only knew, if only he could tell how much I admire him, I would be able to be his friend,” Franklyn said, something Hannibal would have been able to predict based on past sessions and his knowledge of the man, “maybe, if I meet him again, I will be able to tell him how I see him, and I can try again.”

With that, Franklyn looked at Hannibal hopefully, as if expecting him to perpetuate his delusions. He wanted Hannibal to say it was fine for him to fixate in this way. He wanted Hannibal to validate his feelings about this obsession he had.

“What do you hope to accomplish, by creating a friendship with someone like Will Graham?” Hannibal asked, decidedly not feeding into the delusion.

Franklyn’s mouth twitched into a frown for a moment, upset that Hannibal hadn’t outright agreed with him, before resuming his sad smile.

“I think I can help him,” Franklyn said, “it’s clear he has a tortured mind. What great artist doesn’t? But I’m a good friend. I think I can help him see the good things. I can help him know that he’s not lost in the dark.”

How noble, Hannibal thought. Or it would be, if the intervention was in any way desired by the other party. Hannibal was quite sure Graham had no desire to know Franklyn in even a passing way. It had been evident in the way he had dealt with the man at the signing.

But Franklyn was oblivious to this.

“How might you react if the object of your desired friendship rejected you?” Hannibal asked, tipping his head to establish curiosity, “if the desire for friendship is not reciprocated?”

Franklyn started back a bit, as if that had never occurred to him. His brow furrowed in confusion and thought for a moment, and he paused before he answered.

“I’m a good friend,” he repeated, as if to convince himself, “but of course Will doesn’t have to be my friend if he doesn’t want to be. No one does. I wouldn’t force myself onto him, Doctor Lecter. I’m not that kind of person.”

Hannibal smiled reassuringly, though he would very much have liked to disagree with that. From what he had been told and had gleaned from their many conversations, Franklyn rarely had any friends that he did not force himself onto at least in part. His friendships were always fleeting, but the obsession was total in Franklyn. They would be all he talked about, the people he was friends with, and it was clear he felt they were much closer than the other party would ever claim.

“Of course not,” Hannibal said placatingly, “I merely asked to discover if this would ultimately harm you. If perhaps I should encourage you to pursue goals that are more within your reach, at least for the time being.”

Franklyn nodded, accepting the explanation easily. He had the utmost faith and trust in Hannibal, and would never think poorly of him. On some level, Hannibal appreciated that, but he more often found everything about the man irritating. He was glad he could distance himself from Franklyn due to the doctor/patient relationship they had. He had no desire to be the man’s friend, and he had already found himself in a position where he had needed to make their distance clear.

Hannibal no longer pitied Will Graham, as he had demonstrated his ability to protect himself from Franklyn’s unwanted advances. Hannibal now only wanted to peek behind the curtain into how his mind worked. The man was not only brilliant in that his imagination could conjure the most fantastic things and articulate them into words for others to experience it as well, but his intelligence had shone like a flame from within his eyes, and he had demonstrated keen insight into the inner workings of someone he had never met.

Hannibal knew plenty of psychiatrists who would sell their soul for that kind of immediate understanding of their patients. It would make diagnosis and treatment infinitely easier.

Despite his unique talent, or perhaps in consequence of it, Graham had chosen to sequester himself away and use his imagination to write the most fantastically horrifying stories Hannibal had ever read.

And Hannibal wasn’t the only one. Many self-proclaimed horror fanatics and buffs had said that Graham’s work was the most engaging and singularly frightening they had ever come across. Graham could leave even the most hardened horror veterans awake at night with fear of something in the dark.

That actually raised a very relevant point. Why did Franklyn, of all people, read such things? The man was as soft emotionally as he was physically, and it occurred to Hannibal that Franklyn had never spoken about the actual content of the books, instead going on for hours about the media coverage and reviews of each book.

“I don’t think it’ll be that-”

“Excuse me for interrupting you,” Hannibal cut in, internally wincing at his own rudeness, “but it just occurred to me that I have never asked which of Will Graham’s books you enjoyed most. Which is your favorite?”

Franklyn visibly froze, tensing a bit at Hannibal’s words, and Hannibal knew why. Franklyn hadn’t read any of them. He had merely found someone he could idolize and had fixated. Hannibal believed the man had tried, but hadn’t made it through one story before the terror became too great. Oh, but Franklyn would most surely own every book Graham had written. He would have them all lined up on a shelf, hardbacks, in a place of honor. No one would have to know he hadn’t read them, and anyone who heard the way Franklyn raved about the author would likely assume he had.

“I-uh, well, Grotesque but Useful is widely known as his best work so far,” Franklyn babbled, still trying to save the sinking ship, not knowing he was a passenger on the Titanic, “and really, it’s so hard to pick a favorite. You know how it is.”

Hannibal nodded. He knew very well that there were some things that were difficult to choose a favorite from. On any given day, his favorite opera was likely to have changed from the day before.

That being said, Hannibal knew Franklyn was just saying what he thought would satisfy Hannibal. Grotesque but Useful was surely one of the most popular of Will Graham’s books, but Hannibal didn’t consider it the finest of his works. It was popular because it was easier to understand than most of his other books. The nuances were brighter and more clear, and the links between aspects of the story were more obvious. It appealed to a wider range of people, because more people could understand what was going on.

Perhaps that would appeal to someone like Franklyn, but Hannibal wanted to make it clear he knew what the man was up to.

“What part of Grotesque but Useful struck you most? What part did you particularly enjoy?” Hannibal asked, sure Franklyn wouldn’t be able to slip away from this line of questioning, “why does it appeal to you, as a story?”

Franklyn gaped slightly, the rusty gears in his head screeching into motion as he tried to think his way out of this predicament.

“Well, his imagery,” Franklyn tried, vague as possible, “it’s one of the things he’s so popular for. The way he describes the most horrific things is amazing.”

Hannibal nodded.

“But what did you enjoy about the *story* ? What specific image struck *you* ? What have you carried with you after reading it?”

Franklyn was floundering. Hannibal watched as his patient slowly realized he would have to tell the truth. It was even possible he had almost convinced himself he had read the books, and was now realizing he had deluded himself. That would make this entire interaction much more interesting, which was not something Hannibal could often say about sessions with Franklyn.

“Alright, Doctor Lecter, I have something to confess to you,” Franklyn said slowly, wringing his tie in his hands, unable to make eye contact, “I only read about two chapters of it. I tried. I really did! I just, I can’t bring myself to read his books. I always try. Every time there’s a new one, I open it and try to read it! But with my anxious tendencies and all this neurosis, I get too frightened. They’re all so dark. I just can’t stand it.”

There it was. Hannibal watched Franklyn confess this, tears springing to his constantly moist eyes, and Hannibal felt victorious.

Hannibal offered the box of tissues to his patient, silent as Franklyn took several and began wiping at his eyes and nose with them. He was honestly impressed that Franklyn had tried reading more than one of Graham’s books. He was persistent, if nothing else. Hannibal had to admit that. Persistence in his case may not have been a virtue, though.

“This is not something you need to be upset about, Franklyn,” Hannibal assured gently, “I’m sure Will Graham is aware that his work is not fit for all audiences. From what I have heard of it, there is a fairly niche demographic who can read and enjoy his writing. I doubt very much that he would be insulted at all to hear this.”

Franklyn sniffled miserably, dropping the crumpled tissues onto the table next to his chair. Hannibal internally winced at this, but only allowed his expression to show sympathy.

“How could I ever get him to see me as a friend if I can’t even read his books?” Franklyn said, very nearly whining.

Hannibal glanced at his watch, calculating how long he had to bandage Franklyn’s injured emotions and send him on his way. He was satisfied with the progress they had made that day, and more than a little bit smug that he could enjoy the writing of Will Graham while Franklyn was unable to.

7

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"Doctor Lecter speaking," Hannibal chirped pleasantly into the phone, sliding a few sketches around on his desk.

"Uh, hi," A wavering voice came back, "this is Will Graham. My friend gave me your card, and I've been having some problems with sleep, so I finally worked up the nerve to call. Um. I'd like to uh, set an appointment?"

Hannibal smiled warmly, though he knew this man wouldn't be able to see it. If this was the Will Graham he thought it was, the man very well might be able to tell he was smiling over the phone. He shelved the notion for the time being, knowing he didn't have time to examine this particular stroke of incredible fortune.

"Absolutely, Mister Graham," Hannibal said, "is there any particular day and/or time of day that works best for you?"

There was a brief pause, and Hannibal thought he heard a soft laugh from Graham. The man's voice was pleasant, and Hannibal found himself hoping this man would be a pleasant person to work with.

"Well, I'm a writer, so I don't have any prior engagements. No day job. I'm up for whatever you've got open," Graham said.

Hannibal nodded to himself and flipped open his schedule book. He scanned its contents and found the soonest session opened.

"Does this Thursday, at seven thirty, work for you?" Hannibal asked.

Another soft laugh from the other end, and Hannibal smiled.

"Sounds good," Graham replied, "uh, is there anything I should have in mind for the first session? I've uh, never talked to a psychiatrist before. I guess I'm a bit nervous."

Hannibal was actually glad to hear that. He didn't want Graham to be afraid of him, but trust was often easier to foster in someone who was initially apprehensive.

"Not to worry, Mister Graham," he assured, "Just be aware that therapy is not a miracle cure, I suppose. Other than that. I anxiously await our first meeting."

A soft sigh of relief came through the phone, and Hannibal penciled Graham into the Thursday session.

"Thank you," Graham said, sounding tired for the first time during their conversation, "I'll see you on Thursday, then?"

“Indeed,” Hannibal answered, “and thank you, Mister Graham, for your time.”

Once the call was over, Hannibal allowed himself to consider this new development.

So that was what Doctor Hannibal Lecter sounded like.

Will had expected a secretary to answer the phone, and it threw him off to hear the man introduce himself as the doctor. Thinking about it now, the deep European voice that had spoken was just about exactly what he would have expected. It was sophisticated and intelligent, like the tailored red suit he had envisioned. Will couldn’t pin down the accent, but the man spoke comfortably with it and it seemed to suit his voice very well.

Will was satisfied that he would be meeting the good doctor soon enough, and he got back to writing. He was sitting in the chair by the window today and a light drizzle was pattering down on the roof of his little house and through the leaves of the trees outside. He liked weather like that especially, and had opened the windows that overlooked his front deck so the sounds filtered in without glass muffling it.

The wordflow was lazy and relaxed today. No urgency in his fingers as they tapped away at his computer. Sometimes Will would get frustrated when his thoughts decided to meander like that, but today he thought it was nice, and it allowed him to enjoy the weather all the more. The fresh smell of the rain and new forest growth wafted in and filled his head with pleasant memories.

Some might think such a state of mind couldn’t possibly be conducive to writing the type of story Will was known for. He couldn’t possibly write such horrors while he was so pleasantly content.

But the truth was this was nearly the best way to write. Will could get a lot of words out when his mind was in a mad dash, but now he could consider all the bits and pieces of what he wrote. He could see holes in the story and inconsistencies, and solutions came easily. Not only that, but one must always balance horrors with moments of delicate peace and happiness if a story is to be truly good. Tragedy must be offset by a glimmer of hope.

So Will was doing some patchwork, but that was fine. No book could be published on the first draft. Will had never heard of a person who wrote anything worth publishing on the first draft. At least not anything that was both good enough to publish and polished enough to be worth it.

The editing process was long and tedious, sometimes grueling, but Will had never minded it much. He supposed he was one of the very few lucky authors who didn’t have their books torn to shreds by editors and publishers before being put in print. Mostly, changes were small, and now that he was popular, he had the final say on any and all of them.

Will knew he was probably unaccountably lucky for everything to set up just the way it did, but he liked to believe it had something to do with his talent as well. He just managed to

write things that were good enough to only need a few touch ups before they could be published. And if public opinion was anything to go by, he was pretty good at it as well.

There was a flash of light, and Will counted under his breath. When the thunder came, he guessed the lightning had been about six miles away.

Maybe it was better that he didn't have a dog. He knew dogs tended to become upset during storms, even light ones as this was, and he wouldn't be able to keep working if he had to console a barking, whimpering beast. It rained often enough around here that it probably wasn't worth it. Even if he would enjoy the company and occasional distraction.

Will took a drink of his whiskey, enjoying it more than needing it. He knew Beverly sometimes worried about his alcohol intake, but he knew there was nothing to worry about. At least not yet. He drank casually, never really getting drunk. He never blew through his liquor cabinet within a week, though he only had about three bottles of whiskey in it at a time. He just liked it. Liked to savor the taste and heat of the drink. Some cynical, psychologist voice in his mind tried to tell him it was because the taste and smell reminded him of his father, transporting him back to a simpler time.

Will tried to shut out that voice whenever it piped up, refusing to listen as it tried to explain him away as a typical Freudian case. He had always hated Freud anyway.

Hopefully, Doctor Hannibal Lecter wouldn't be one of those Freudian shrinks. Will knew they were still around, more prominent in psychiatry than psychology, and he didn't really want to pay the guy just to have him say the nightmares were caused by his terrible, repressed sexual urges.

Nope. Will would politely thank the man and put his name on the list of people he hoped to never see again, if that was what happened. Thank you very much for the ridiculous guesswork and lazy psychiatry, but I think I'd rather just be left to the hellish landscape of my own mind. Return to sender. Remove from call list. Goodbye.

But if Alana trusted the guy, Will would try him out. He didn't think Alana would send him to a quack. She was usually a good judge of character. He would see the man in good faith.

Will sighed and stretched his arms above his head. One thing could certainly be said against a life of writing. It didn't encourage frequent physical activeness.

Will shut his computer and stood up, stretching his spine and legs as he went. He needed to get up and move around. Even though it disrupted his work.

One thing about training to be FBI that Will was often glad had stuck, was the habit of keeping in good shape. Will didn't often feed himself properly, but he hadn't let himself waste away either. He exercised frequently, keeping his muscles from atrophy and fat deposits something he didn't have to worry too much about. Of course, his FBI training was not the only thing responsible for this one of his very few good habits. His imagination was equally, if not more to blame. He had learned of all the negative effects of prolonged idleness, and his sleep was not the only thing plagued with nightmares.

When Will had been sitting for too long, which could range from hours to days depending on some other variables, Will's mind would conjure these images and facts of what would be happening to his body because of it. He would feel phantom pains in his legs, and a voice would tell him they were most certainly blood clots that would soon break free and move to a vital organ. Often, out of pure psycho-sematic phenomena, his legs or feet would go numb and the voice would be sure he had lost all ability to move them whatsoever. The only way to subdue and silence the voice was to exercise, and then it would retreat for as long as it took Will to grow idle again.

The voice had not yet started its irritating reminders, but Will could feel it waking up and beginning to draw breath to do just that. He wanted to beat it to the punch.

It was bound to be muddy and slippery outside, but Will didn't mind getting a bit dirty. He dressed in warm clothes to keep from getting a chill from the rain, donned his sturdy work boots with a thick tread, and set out for a bit of a hike. Regardless of his habit of exercising, Will had never liked doing it indoors. He didn't like treadmills at all, finding it boring to walk or run and not go anywhere. That was one of the large appeals this house had for him. The woods around were perfect for hiking in, and there were miles to explore. His imagination could glut itself on all the sensations of the outdoors, and be satisfied that he was not about to die from being a sloth.

Will really, honestly, enjoyed his adventures into the woods around his house, and this was an instance where he would gladly admit it reminded him of simpler times. He had always liked the outdoors, and had learned to climb trees at the age of four, though trees were less apt to allow it now that he was a full grown adult. He had even escaped a rabid dog once by scaling a tree and waiting it out. It had only been about an hour before his dad had come along with his shotgun, having brought it for just that purpose.

That was the first time Will had seen death up close, and the memory had never left him. His dad had been a dead shot, and the dog only had the chance to look over in his direction before he had a bullet between its eyes.

Will's sneakers had squelched in the blood when his dad called him down from the tree. Dad had taken them straightway to the doctor's for a rabies shot. He may have been a back country hick in nearly every respect, but Will's dad was as smart as they come. He knew you didn't have to get bit or scratched for it to get you.

There had still been brown stains on Will's sneakers almost a week later, when it rained and he purposefully walked through large puddles to wash it off.

Will remembered that day now, as he trudged through thick, clinging mud. When he had walked back inside, soaked to the bone, his dad had looked at him knowingly and made him some hot cider to stave off a chill.

Another flash, and a low roll of thunder a few seconds later. Still far enough away that Will felt no need to worry.

Will's ears picked up the sound of the creek that ran through the woods, and he altered his course slightly so he would be headed toward it. He liked to watch the little frogs and

redneck sliders, and in the light rain he thought they might be more active.

When Will reached the creek, he saw that it had risen a bit. Enough so that Will figured it must be raining harder somewhere upstream. The new volume made the current a bit swifter, creating tiny rapids where the water would usually run clear as glass.

Chapter End Notes

I'm back from beyond the grave (or from beyond internet problems XD) Sorry to keep you all waiting.

8

When Hannibal opened the door of his office at exactly seven twenty-nine that Thursday, he was pleased to see that he had been right, and his newest patient really was the same Will Graham. The man looked up when the door opened, and offered a smile that could truly only be described as tired. Had Hannibal not already been told by the man himself that he was having trouble sleeping, he would have still been sure of it from the way he looked in that moment, as he stood up from the chair in Hannibal's waiting room.

"Will Graham, I presume," Hannibal asked, extending his hand on reflex, "I am Doctor Hannibal Lecter."

Graham nodded, accepting the offered hand a moment later than most, likely a delayed response due to his sleep loss.

"Yep. I'm Will. I swear we've met before, though," Graham said, looking Hannibal over with curious confusion, "I never forget a face. It'll come to me. I'm just a mite tired at the moment, in case you hadn't picked that up."

Hannibal nodded and ushered Graham into the office.

"You certainly do look like you could use a few extra hours of sleep," he agreed, "but that is why you are here, so I hope we can come to find something to help."

Graham took the offered seat with a nod of thanks, still staring at Hannibal intensely, as if there was something important he needed to remember.

"Yeah," Graham said slowly, the word drawn out as if it took a great level of concentration for him to say, "but I have to admit that's not the only reason."

Hannibal tipped his head curiously. Will Graham looked like a man in need of a good meal and a long rest, though his eyes were as vibrant and sharp as any he had seen. Hannibal didn't know what other motivation Graham may have had for setting an appointment with him, but he was eager to find out.

"What other reasons did you have?" he asked lightly, careful not to sound too eager.

Graham laughed softly, looking almost sheepish. He yawned, his jaw cracking as it stretched.

"Well, I'm a bit embarrassed to say, honestly," Graham said, "but I guess it rounds out to being about your name."

Graham paused for another yawn, and he looked like he had to pry his eyes back open after. His exhaustion was immense. Hannibal could have seen it from a mile away.

"I mean, I told you I'm a writer," Graham continued, "so it won't be too much for me to tell you that your name would make one hell of a book character. And now that I've seen you,

I'm starting to feel like I'm in a book. If I wrote up a character like you, and named them Doctor Hannibal Lecter, I would be stretching the suspension of disbelief to the breaking point."

Hannibal was intrigued by this vein of conversation, but equally so by the way Graham spoke. It was as if the words were escaping him before he decided to say them. It was likely because he was so exhausted, and Hannibal wondered just how bad his insomnia was, and if there were other problems adding to his sleep troubles.

"Why is that?" Hannibal asked, pleased that the man's state encouraged him to speak freely, at least.

Graham shrugged, and a light smile pulled at his lips.

"You're high class, from Europe, well educated, artistic, personable, and just about everything that makes a character too good to be believed. And I'll bet that isn't even the half of it. Maybe I'll find out more things about you that make you even more unbelievable."

Hannibal smiled, and he was honestly star-struck. He had known Will Graham was brilliant, but he hadn't expected such a blatant display of his genius so soon upon their first conversation.

"What gives you the impression I am artistic?" he asked, "or personable?"

Graham waved his hand as if to tell Hannibal the answer was trivial, and entirely unimportant.

"Your desk is covered with drawings," Graham said, as if it were the simplest thing in the world, though the said desk was across the large office, and Hannibal hadn't noticed him so much as glance in that direction, "they're excellent, too. You're obviously personable, because you're friends with someone like Alana Bloom, and she even went so far as to recommend your services. She's a good judge of character.

Hannibal was absolutely floored by what Graham was saying. The man was ready to drop to the floor from sleep loss, and still managed to spout the kind of observant connections not out of place for an Arthur Conan Doyle novel. Now, Hannibal wanted almost nothing more than to see the man's mind at work when he was well rested and healthy.

"I would venture to say you seem a rather astute judge of character yourself, Mister Graham," Hannibal said, already leafing through his internal catalogue of treatments for insomnia.

Graham huffed a laugh, running a hand over his face in another show of his great exhaustion.

"Call me Will. Mister Graham makes me sound like a teacher or something. I've never liked it. Will is short and simple, and suits me just fine."

Hannibal nodded, pleased to have at least hit this first step of acquaintanceship. He had actually known about this preference of Will's as he had frequently told fans to call him by his first name when he made his rare appearance at a signing or other event. It was one of the

few actual pieces of information about the man Hannibal had been able to find before meeting him. The one thing Hannibal believed offered a true insight into his mind, if one knew to see it.

“Very well. Will, then. I am impressed by your insight. I think it’s about time we start to discuss your sleep problems, however. Could you describe your struggles to me?”

Will nodded, stifling yet another yawn and then giving his head a sharp shake, likely to wake himself up.

“It’s mostly the nightmares that cause problems,” he said, “I don’t go to sleep, and stay up for days at a time, to avoid them. If and when I do sleep, I usually wake up after an hour or two from a nightmare. Covered in sweat, shaking like a fresh fawn.”

Hannibal smiled a bit at the interesting imagery. If nothing else, Will certainly had a way with words. But that was nothing new.

“That’s interesting,” Hannibal said honestly, noting the wry smile Will gave him at the words, “genuinely. Most who suffer from long term insomnia, especially the sleep maintenance variety, cannot identify nightmares or dreams as the cause. I do have more questions, if that is alright.”

Hannibal tipped his head curiously, imploring Will to allow him to continue.

Will shrugged and made a gesture with his hand to communicate that Hannibal should go on.

“Thank you. Are you able to remember these nightmares after you wake up?” Hannibal asked.

Will nodded.

“Oh yeah,” he said, “Always. I could tell you each nightmare I’ve had for the past six months. In chronological order to boot. I’ve been cursed with perfect recall.”

At that, Will’s eyes widened and he sat forward in the chair, snapping his fingers and smiling.

“Speak of the devil, I just remembered where I know you from,” he said, sounding excited. Hannibal was surprised, because he had been sure Will had never seen him before today. “Yeah! You were the dandy lurking around the library during the signing a couple weeks ago. I told you I’d remember.”

Will looked proud of himself, and Hannibal had to admit it was impressive. He had done everything he could not to be noticed that day, and he almost always succeeded when he did so. He had been sure no one had taken more than a passing note of his presence. It was remarkable that Will recognized him.

“Yes, you did,” Hannibal agreed, “and I confess I doubted we had ever crossed paths before now. From what I remember, you must be a fairly popular author. The line was an admirable length.”

Will waved the comment away easily, as if it really had no bearing on reality. It was inconsequential.

“Sure. I have to admit you sort of gave me the creeps back then. You just hung around the edges of the room, watching everything happen. I actually worried you were a stalker, the way you were about. I guess you really were just curious about what the fuss was about, though, right?”

Will now tipped his own head, mimicking the way Hannibal had. His eyes were still sharp despite the dark circles under them, and Hannibal wondered if a lie would be believed.

“Yes. I had not been told anyone even mildly well known would be making an appearance at the library that day. I did find myself curious to see what was happening, but I have never been much invested in the drama surrounding media consumption.”

Will watched Hannibal as he spoke, and Hannibal had the sense that he was testing to see if it was the truth. Something in his demeanor must have come off as sincere, because Will nodded and smiled after a moment.

“Yeah. I’ve never really liked it. I bet the biggest reason there were so many people there that day is because I don’t do that kind of thing often. I get a lot of complaints that I don’t make appearances often enough. My company is a highly valued commodity, apparently.”

The dry humor in Will’s tone told Hannibal of Will’s true feelings about it all. Will could have said he enjoyed nothing more than seeing his fans and signing their copies of his books, but if he sounded as he did now, his tone would have proved it all lies.

9

Will left Doctor Lecter's office with a list of things he was to try before their next session.

Will hadn't intended to have another session, fully planning to get a prescription for a sleeping aid and never going back. Not only had Lecter talked him into coming again, and trying all these "normal" fixes, but he had managed to get past all of Will's expert deflections so they had ended up actually talking about his sleep problems and nightmares.

In all, Will was impressed, but pretty irked by the man.

"Will Graham speaking," Will answered his phone, knowing already it was probably Beverly. Not many people called him.

"Hey, princess, how'd it go with the shrink?" Bev asked immediately.

Will huffed, smiling to himself, but making it sound as if he were upset.

"I swear, that guy has some hypno-magic something or other. He got stuff outta me I didn't plan to tell him, and I think I agreed to try his meditation stuff and go back next week. Don't ever talk to this guy. He's crazy good."

Beverly laughed, and continued to laugh until she ended up just gasping for air.

"That's fantastic!" she squealed, "I can't believe someone got the better of you! And a psychiatrist too! I can't believe it! He must be some kind of genius to get you to agree to come back. What's his secret? Did he promise you drugs? Is he hot? What's his deal?"

Will laughed and shook his head. He leaned back in his chair and looked at the ceiling. This was a rare moment when he actually hadn't been writing. He had been reading. He firmly believed one must be an avid reader to be any good at writing.

"I wouldn't call him unattractive," Will admitted, recalling the man's appearance, "But really, he's just good at his job. He's smart, and he knows what he's doing. He didn't underestimate me. The fact that I didn't have the jump on him is probably the biggest factor. Most people don't meet me on even footing."

Beverly hummed in consideration.

"Fair enough," she said, "but I'm still impressed. You're going back?"

Will shrugged, though Beverly couldn't see it.

"I said I would. And to be honest, I'm not dreading it half as much as I thought I would. Normally, I'd hate the idea of going to a shrink after they've had the chance to come up with ideas about me. But I don't think this one is going to make me hate him. He's actually not presumptive or arrogant. He looks like the prototype for high brow snobbery, but he's very

frank and polite. Not to mention, he's the embodiment of someone I couldn't write as a character. He's literally too good to be true."

"Oh?" Beverly said, and Will knew she would be raising an eyebrow suggestively, "too good to be true, and not unattractive? Do you think maybe you have a crush on the guy?"

Will snorted a laugh and covered his mouth after. He only snorted when he was surprised.

"Not my type, Bev. He probably took one look at my flannel shirt and filed me away under "poor thing". Not the kind of person I would waste my feelings on," Will said, "besides, he's my shrink now, so that would be messy."

Beverly huffed unhappily.

"I'm just saying, you haven't "wasted your feelings" on anyone in a while. I think he's the first new person you've had an actual conversation with in two years," she said, "Even if he's your shrink, I would totally root for you if you wanted to go for it."

Will sighed and shook his head.

"Thanks for the support," he said, "if I ever meet someone, I'll be sure to let you know."

Will ended the call a moment later, shaking his head and smiling.

In all honesty, Will was mostly content being alone. He only felt lonely when he allowed himself to think about it, which was almost never, and he knew his standards for any potential relationship were a bit unorthodox.

To begin with, he supposed he would need someone who hadn't read his books, because that was all most people could think or talk about when they were around him. He'd even had a close call once when he's gone out with a woman only to find out she had been stalking him because of the books. She'd had four full sets of his books, and three of them had all been read through to the point of being in tatters. The last set, of course, were all copies Will had signed, so she had deemed them too valuable to read.

That had been one whole mess, and Will wasn't anxious to repeat it. He was lucky he had his empathy disorder, or he might not have realized what was going on at that first date. She had been a good actor.

But Will's other conditions for a potential partner were probably too much to expect from anyone. He wanted someone who not only understood the way his mind was inclined toward darker things, but fully embraced it. He wanted to be known, and have those dark things be known and loved along with him, as a part of him. Logically, he knew he couldn't be with someone who was as much a mess as himself. He would need someone who would remind him to eat and sleep. He had met a lot of people in his life, though he tried to avoid it when possible, and he hadn't met a single one who could do all that. Beverly was the closest he had, he supposed, but they were never going to see each other as anything other than friends. Why she wasn't right, Will couldn't be sure, but Beverly was not his type.

But Doctor Lecter hadn't even mentioned Will's books. Will had been the one who brought it up, and neither of them had really talked about the books themselves. They had briefly discussed the fact that Will was a writer, but Will thought Doctor Lecter might not even know what kind of books it was he wrote.

Over all, it was refreshing.

Maybe the thing above all else that had Will agree to return had been the fact that the conversation with Lecter hadn't been founded on the horror which his mind had conjured and made him a success.

And Will liked that. Any other psychiatrist, if they had read even a bit of his writing, would have wanted to discuss the potential causes behind his fascination with the dark. Even Alana, who was not a horror fan and didn't read his books, couldn't help but try to pry him apart to find the core of his being. She tried not to, but the questions and theories flowed from her naturally. Will didn't resent her for that, though he had to limit conversation with her to keep it that way, but this experience with Doctor Lecter had been amazing to Will and had revealed something he hadn't known before.

Most authors love to talk about their books. Get them the proper audience, and they will even talk about aspects of the story they had never consciously considered.

But, apparently, that's not quite the same with Will. He wanted not an audience with which to discuss his writing, but someone who could carry a conversation easily with him without even once applying their words to his works.

And Doctor Lecter hadn't made it feel like Will was talking to a psychiatrist. Their conversational flow had felt organic, but Will knew the man had managed to steer then to the points of interest with a practiced ease. Lecter had learned what he had set out to, and Will hadn't even caught the slight of hand but in hindsight.

That was how, despite himself, Will found he actually did want to go back for the upcoming session.

Will woke up, covered in sweat and shaking. He sat up in bed and was about to roll onto his feet when he remembered the list of things Doctor Lecter had recommended he try when he woke from a nightmare.

Slowly, Will laid back down, counting out a few long breaths as he got settled again. He stared at the ceiling and counted his sensations. A way to ground himself in the present, according to Lecter.

Will's mind was racing, but he reached to the table next to his bed and grabbed the nearest notebook and pen.

It was dark, being the middle of the night, but Will had excellent night vision and he began to write.

Usually, when woken from a nightmare, Will would get to work on one of his books and write until he forgot he had even gone to sleep in the first place. But now, he was trying to fix himself, so he started writing down every detail of the dream he had just had.

Being a writer, and having perfect recall, Will managed to fill several pages with what he had seen. Then, he started from the beginning again, changing the worst parts. The parts that had caused his reaction. He needed to mend the broken parts of his mind, and so he imagined the same dream, but with just enough changes to keep the horror at bay.

After Lecter had recommended this kind of self-therapy, Will had looked it up and seen that it was effective for those who suffered from chronic nightmares due to PTSD or basically anything else. There were other ways, but this was basically the simplest and most efficient. There had been people who had not been able to find relief from any other remedies, even medications.

So, Will figured Lecter knew what he was doing and he had decided to try it out. He knew he couldn't expect results after only a few dreams rewritten like this, but he was ready to commit to trying it until either it worked or Lecter told him it wasn't going to.

Once Will had written down all the changes for the dream, he closed his eyes and conjured it. He played the entire dream, seeing the images before his eyes again, but this time the version he had created for himself. He felt anticipation, but no fear. He played it over and over, laying in his bed with his eyes closed, until he fell back to sleep.

10

Hannibal hoped Will would take his suggestions for treating the nightmares. He believed it would be able to help him, and Hannibal truly did want to help Will.

He may not have been perfectly honest with Will about his knowledge of the man's writing and work, but he hoped Will would come to trust him. If Will trusted him, he would be more open in speaking to him, and Hannibal could peek behind the curtain into the beautiful mind that had motivated him to seek out the man in the first place.

When Will spoke during their first conversation, he had been concise and direct, though had very skillfully deflected whenever Hannibal tried to steer the conversation towards the psychological. It had been an intricate dance to learn what he needed in order to help Will with his insomnia.

Insomnia would eventually become harmful if it continued. Not only would it wreak havoc on that delectable mind, but it would weaken his immune system and leave him vulnerable to physical illness. Hannibal didn't want to risk it just yet, though he was curious what effects it would have on a mind like Will's.

For now, Hannibal would be careful to do no harm. If there ever came a time when he felt it was safe to experiment somewhat with Will, he would then gauge if it would be worth it.

Hannibal traced a finger along the spine of Will's first published book. He was glad, now, that he had decided to move them from his office shelves before seeing Will. While they would be easily lost among the many books on the shelves lining the room, Will Graham had been incredibly observant and would have easily picked his own books out of them all.

Hannibal thought it likely Will hardly met anyone who hadn't read his books, based on his lifestyle, or had at least passing knowledge of them. The way he had spoken about his work seemed to show he had no real interest in discussing the books, and Hannibal would guess he would appreciate conversation that didn't have anything to do with his writing.

In that vein, Hannibal was well equipped. His true interest was not in the books Will had written, but in the mind they had sprouted from. The words in the books were static and unchanging, but Hannibal was trained in the shaping and knowing of minds, and with an imagination like Will's, Hannibal believed his mind had great potential for influence.

Hannibal pulled the book from the shelf and studied the cover. He wondered, not for the first time, how Will had found an artist for the cover pieces. Surely, there would be some disparity between what Will conjured in his head and what a hired brush could produce, but the picture was just as horrifically evocative as all the words Will had written in his novels.

Hannibal wondered, also not for the first time, if Will would appreciate someone bringing the images that burst forth from his skull to life. How might he react if someone were to pay homage to him in a way that allowed his visions to become reality.

Will didn't seem haunted or tortured by the things he wrote, nor truly by the nightmares that prompted his writing so often. The only thing that bothered him, as far as he had expressed, was the fact that the dreams interrupted his sleep.

Which was remarkable.

A man whose head was so full of horrific images and ideas, who didn't go a moment without creating stories in his mind to hold all the concepts of death and damnation, was more bothered by the fact that he woke up than the fact that these images followed him into sleep.

From What Will had described during their conversation, many of his dreams ended with his death. But he hadn't seemed upset by that as he described how he had died in various ways. He had seemed engrossed in his own story, and fascinated by the level of detail he had been able to have in a dream. Hannibal didn't blame him, because the amount of detail was phenomenal for dreams ranging back to months before he related them.

Hannibal replaced the book on the shelf, pleased with the sight of them all together.

There would be time to discuss it all with Will himself in the future, as long as Hannibal could keep from frightening him away. But Hannibal had an idea that Will didn't scare easily.

Will's phone began to go off, an alarm reminding him to get up, stretch, and eat something healthy. This was probably the item on the list of things he had brought back from therapy that he liked the least.

Will glared at his phone, his fingers still typing.

He knew he needed to do what the alarm was meant to remind him to, but he didn't want to stop working. The alarms were going to get in the way of him finishing this next book. They would break his concentration every time they went off, and would tear him away from his keyboard just so he could eat something.

With a deep sigh, Will stopped typing and stood up. He stretched on his way to the kitchen, trying to think of something he could eat quickly so he could get back to writing.

Will knew it was working, which was the absolute Hell of it. He had been following the list of things Lecter had told him for almost a week now, and it was starting to work. His sleep was better, and he didn't feel as tired during the day. When he dreamt, the nature of his dreams were the same, but he did not feel so distressed upon waking form them. He had even slept through a whole night once this week, which hadn't happened in years.

So, Will was feeling much better, but that didn't stop him from being annoyed about it. Especially because he could imagine the smug expression Lecter would wear when he found out his advice had been helping Will so much.

Despite all that, and the idea that he might not even need to continue going, Will still planned to go back. He was actually looking forward to it. The awful truth was that Will had enjoyed

talking to Lecter, and didn't want to give that up. Will had never connected so instantly with anyone before, even Beverly, and wanted to see what would happen. He was curious to see what the result of this new relationship would be.

Will cooked up some fish, having been expressly told pre-packaged food did not qualify as healthy, and sat at his little kitchen table. He had a notebook by his seat, waiting for just such a moment, so he picked up a pen and began writing as he ate.

Will thought his flirtation with therapy might have something to do with his new book idea. He had felt inspired to have it revealed at the end that each of the deaths had been orchestrated by a psychiatrist, who had never lifted a finger, but simply convinced his patients to commit those atrocities. Will wondered what Lecter would say about this idea if he told him. Any regular psychiatrist would say Will was trying to process and get over his reflexive rejection of therapy, allowing his internal villainization of his therapist to be manifest in this evil man of fiction.

Will didn't ascribe to any reason of thought so simplistic and patchworked together as that. He had a fairly good grasp of the way his own mind worked, and it should be a privilege for anyone to be made into a killer in one of his books. Only interesting people were given that status.

The psychiatrist in the book was not as perfect as Lecter seemed to be so far. He had no skill in art or a large social circle, but he masked these imperfections in such a way that no one would know he had any. Will let him wear three piece suits and attend operas, just as he could tell Lecter did, but there were enough differences to make him an entirely separate person. And Will allowed the character to be so aesthetically similar to Lecter because he didn't think the man would ever read it. If Lecter ever found out about the fictional man, Will would have to explain why it was actually something he should be flattered by.

Will wondered if there would ever be a time he would feel comfortable telling the man something so hidden about himself. He had never even told Beverly the specifics of how he decided who would be the killer and who would be killed.

Will actually hoped that there would come a day he would do that. He would like to have someone he could share all his secrets with. If Lecter became that person, all the more convenient.

When Will was done with his food, he felt the familiar ache in his legs meaning he needed to exercise some. He pulled on a light jacket and put the notebook in one of the pockets in case he felt the need to stop and write something while he was out, putting three pens in the pocket as well. He headed out for a hike, making a note of the thick blanket of clouds overhead but thinking he would be safe enough to walk a distance.

Will was about a mile out when the clouds broke open and poured their contents directly on his head. He snapped the flap of his pocket shut to protect the notebook, and cursed himself for not having worn something warmer. It had been a bit chilly when he had left, but his jacket wasn't water resistant and the rain was on the cusp of freezing. He didn't usually mind the rain, but he just wasn't prepared for it this time.

By the time Will got back home, he was soaked through and his hair was hanging in dripping dark strands in his face. He lit a fire in the fireplace and set his notebook, at this point a bit wet along the edge of the pages but otherwise fine, out on the desk to recover.

Will dried his hair with a towel, leaving it in a mussed mess as he shucked off his soaking clothes and got into something dry and warm. He sat by the fireplace, in his chair by the window, setting his laptop on his legs as he listened to the rain patter against the glass. He shuddered and shivered a bit from the bone-deep chill, but that didn't get in the way of his typing. He got through a few chapters before his alarm went off telling him it was time to get into bed for the night. He did as he was supposed to, though begrudgingly since he had been on a roll.

He was definitely planning to give Lecter an earful about interrupting his writing process when he went in for his session the next day. He didn't know how to expect Lecter to respond to his complaining, but he did think Lecter would make it interesting.

Will drifted off to sleep, still shivering a bit despite the fire and his thick quilts.

11

When Will walked into the office, Hannibal immediately noticed a change.

Will looked better than the last time Hannibal had seen him. By a good margin, at that. The dark circles under Will's eyes were nearly gone, his eyes were brighter and he stood up straighter. His skin had more color as well, and he just looked overall healthier.

Hannibal felt a rush of pride at having helped Will that much. He hadn't expected such a drastic improvement over just a week, so he felt as if he had done exceptionally well.

"Good afternoon, Will," he said, "You are looking well."

Will huffed and nodded.

"I've been following your recommendations," he said in agreement, "and I guess there really is something to it all. Even though you didn't give me sleeping pills, I think you did help. That's not going to stop me from complaining, because those stupid alarms keep interrupting me when I'm writing. They are perfectly spaced for peak annoyance, you know. Always right when I'm really excited about what's going on with the words."

Hannibal smiled warmly.

He was glad Will was still writing, though from what he had seen he guessed it would be a feat to ever get the man to stop. There were some people who could not handle such an upheaval of their routines, even when it was an improvement, and would have stopped being able to focus on their regular activities at all. The fact that Will was still able to write meant he wasn't having that reaction to the changes. That was good.

"Once you have become used to how you feel when you are well taken care of, the reminders may not be necessary. Your body with remind you instead. Until then, I suppose it is just a sacrifice you must make. I am glad to hear it is an improvement. May I inquire after your nightmares?"

Will walked over to the chair, but didn't seem nearly as lethargic as he had the previous time. He opted to walk around a bit instead of sit immediately, and Hannibal was happy to indulge the man. Hannibal was being continually validated in his past decisions with every improvement he saw in the man, and he wanted to encourage his activity.

"I suppose you may," Will said, feigning exasperation, "they're a bit better. I've done that thing you told me to for all the bad dreams I've had since last week. I'm not sure if it's been really helping that much or if it's mostly placebo, though."

Hannibal nodded in understanding.

"Even a placebo effect can have therapeutic value," he reminded Will, knowing full well Will would already be aware of it, "so I see no reason to disregard any improvement you have

seen in your sleep."

Will nodded thoughtfully, though it looked as if he had already moved on from that vein of thought. He was gazing around the office as if seeing it for the first time. Hannibal wondered what observations he would have this time, as their previous meeting had revealed he picked up on even the smallest details.

"You're a clever psychiatrist," Will said, and Hannibal preened a bit for the praise, "most people can't get me to talk about something I don't want to, but you did. I've even met a fair few psychiatrists in my time already, and none of them are as good at that as you."

Hannibal wouldn't normally have put much stock in compliments like that. Most people he met would bend over backwards to say anything good about him just to get his attention. But it was clear to him that Will wasn't accustomed to wasting his breath. Will's words were never empty, and he wouldn't have said it if it wasn't meant to accomplish something.

"Thank you," Hannibal said, nodding his head in acknowledgement, "but if you have met a fair few psychiatrists, why would you risk disappointment in trying me out?"

Will smiled a bit, wandering around as he studied the room. Hannibal thought maybe he had responded to the praise correctly.

"I already told you why I came," Will said, "I was curious about someone with a name like yours and a personality capable of impressing Alana Bloom. That, and I doubted any of the psychiatrists I met before you would be willing to prescribe a sleep aid for me."

Hannibal raised his eyebrows, watching Will's wandering curiously. Clearly, Will was looking for something, but Hannibal couldn't figure out what it might be. He wondered if Will knew what it was.

"You have returned, despite the fact I also neglected to offer you medication," he noted, amused.

Will huffed a soft laugh.

"Yeah. I guess you're just interesting enough to keep me curious," Will said, then glanced over to where Hannibal was standing, "and clever enough I think therapy might just work this time round."

Hannibal smiled. Again, he was torn between pride and humility. He knew Will was not speaking idly, but he also knew he would not impress Will if he proved to be vain.

"Therapy can only help as much as you will allow it, Will," Hannibal replied, sure Will would think this was a typical response from a psychiatrist, "it all depends on you."

Will laughed, and Hannibal noticed his laugh was more subdued today than before. He wondered why that may be. If Will felt uncomfortable for some reason, Hannibal didn't know. He would have only to wait until Will told him what it was.

“How very predictably psychiatrist of you, Doctor,” Will said, as Hannibal had expected, “This is whatever I need it to be, and you’re my friend, and “here, Will, what do you see in this inkblot?”, right?”

Hannibal smiled at Will’s humor. It was sharp, and abrasive, but clever. Hannibal was relishing in it, even though it was not the type of thing he would often entertain in his acquaintances. In Will, it was charming and insightful, and Hannibal couldn’t find it in himself to begrudge it.

“Do you see me as that type of psychiatrist, Will?” he asked.

Will stopped his curious wandering suddenly, his brow creasing as he thought deeply about his next words. Hannibal watched as emotions flickered over his features, seeming at war with each other for some reason. Hannibal honestly didn’t know what to expect from Will now.

“I see you as the kind of psychiatrist who isn’t afraid to try something if you think it’ll get the results you’re after,” Will answered slowly, as if unsure, “if you thought showing me inkblots would give you the insight you wanted, you’d do it. If you thought hypnotism was the answer, you’d try it. Even unorthodox treatments aren’t outside of your comfort zone. You play your patients like a Theremin, manipulating the sound they make with a steady hand and perfect pitch.”

Hannibal was awestruck by what Will had just said. Hannibal had known he possessed remarkable insight, and had been given an example in their first session, but this had been more than hyper-observation. Will couldn’t have simply seen clues around the office to know these things. This was something else. Something more.

Will looked at Hannibal, studying him without ever meeting his eyes. Hannibal wondered what he saw. What would he see if he could look at himself through Will Graham’s eyes?

“You know, most psychiatrists would be offended if I accused them of playing their patents like an instrument,” Will said, smirking slightly though he still seemed somewhat distracted, “even one as pretentious as a Theremin.”

Hannibal nodded, conceding to that point. It was true, most psychiatrists would have found that insulting, even the insinuation that they would manipulate their patients. Hannibal had no objections to it, as Will’s evaluation had been fair and accurate. There would be no use in arguing against it. And he was curious to see what else Will might decide to say on the subject.

“Perhaps,” Hannibal said in agreement, “though I find taking offense to a statement of truth to be unproductive. What you have said is not inaccurate.”

Will tipped his head, but began his wandering again. It was as if he couldn’t hold still, and Hannibal wondered if he would feel better if he was writing. The speed at which Will managed to produce books led Hannibal to believe he was writing nearly constantly, so it was not unreasonable to think Will might be uncomfortable without it.

Will hadn’t brought a notebook with him, as far as Hannibal could tell, which had probably been an act of courtesy on his part. He had wanted to be present for his therapy session. It was possible the only reason he had been able to sit for his first session was his sheer exhaustion, and now that he was rested he had too much energy for that.

“That begs the question,” Will said from somewhere behind Hannibal during his wandering, “what kind of tune do you play? Of course, I expect you to claim it’s whatever tune is most beneficial to your patient, but I also don’t think that’s entirely accurate. You wouldn’t claim the word manipulate is accurate if there wasn’t something more to your treatments.”

It appeared as if Will was genuinely wondering about Hannibal’s ethicality in his practice. He didn’t look to be distressed so much as curious. Hannibal found that fascinating.

“Perhaps we can come to a compromise, Will,” Hannibal said, gesturing to Will’s seat in a bid for him to take it. He would like to be able to see Will for their conversation, even though he had been willing to let Will wander if that made him comfortable. “You may ask me any question you like, and I will answer as honestly as I am able. In return, I ask that you do the same. If it would make you more comfortable, you may write in a notebook as we talk.”

Will had plopped down in the chair as Hannibal spoke, and now he blushed slightly and laughed sheepishly.

“I didn’t expect you to guess,” Will admitted, “I don’t normally go so long without writing in some way. Even when I drive, I record notes for myself.”

Hannibal nodded.

“All your ideas and inspiration are building up, like water behind a dam,” he concluded, marveling at Will’s mind once more, “you release the pressure through your creation. When you are unable to, the pressure builds up. Does it cause you pain, or merely discomfort?”

Will tapped his fingers anxiously on the armrest of the chair, his eyes glancing about, everywhere other than Hannibal.

“I can’t really write while we talk if I have nothing to write on or with,” Will said, a bit snappish, but Hannibal forgave it.

Hannibal nodded and stood. He walked to his desk and retrieved an empty notebook and a pen. He gave them to Will and resumed his seat.

“You may keep those,” he said, “as long as it is exclusive to our sessions. I would like you to only write in it while we talk, if you are amenable to that.”

Will frowned in confusion, but shrugged as he opened the notebook and smoothed down the first page to begin writing.

“You haven’t asked if I’ll be able to keep a conversation up while I write,” he noted, clicking the pen and beginning to write even as he spoke. Hannibal admired his ability to do so. It was something he must have developed over the years in order to never be without this release.

Hannibal smiled.

“No, I have not,” he replied simply.

12

Will sneezed, and it felt like the kind of sneeze from having a cold, rather than just a bit of dust or some such. He could feel the beginning of illness in himself, but he was determined to fight through it. He only had one commitment each week, so he would get through his session with Doctor Lecter, and then he would rest for a week. It would be fine.

Will sniffed and continued writing.

Lecter was clever. Will hadn't known how much so until today, and he wondered if the man was still hiding some of his intelligence. If so, they had a lot to learn about each other. Will wondered if they would ever really know each other, or if they would always dance circles around the truth.

"Well then, Doctor Lecter," Will said, "care to explain how you figured out why I was anxiously pacing the office today?"

Lecter nodded politely.

"Certainly. You have told me you are a writer, and I have learned that you have written quite a few books. By my calculations, you must write very nearly constantly to accomplish what you do. When you began to show such nervous energy, I guessed you had an idea you were itching to write down. It was nothing as impressive as the deductions I have seen you make, Will."

Will smiled. He had to admit that was true. He had always been able to make jumps others didn't understand. What Hannibal had guessed wasn't all that much of a stretch, but it was still better than what most people could manage. Anyone else probably would have just asked him why he was acting nervous.

The soft scratch of the pen on paper was soothing to Will, and he wondered if every sensation associated with writing would have that conditioned response for him. Like Pavlov's dogs, salivating at the sound of a bell, Will was calmed by the very sound of words being put to paper.

"As it so happens, most of the stuff I write never makes it into a finished draft," Will confided, feeling better and more confident with a pen in his hand, "I write fast and often, and half of it just isn't any good. But getting the bad stuff out makes room for the good stuff to be heard."

Lecter seemed interested in hearing this, and Will realized this was the first time they had actually talked about writing. They weren't talking about his books, really, which was perfect, but he still appreciated the fact that Lecter had allowed this to come up organically. He hadn't pushed at all, allowing Will to be the one to really get them on this subject. It was nice.

“That must be frustrating at times,” Lecter noted, “feeling as if a large portion of your work is wasted.”

Will shook his head. The motion caused his brain to swish around in his skull uncomfortably, something he knew was a precursor to a fever when he had a cold. Regardless, he pressed on.

“I got over that real quick,” he replied, “I still churn out books faster than most authors can even imagine, and the good stuff is really good.”

Lecter smiled. Will wondered what the man would think of the things he wrote. Will hadn’t seen anything remotely similar in genre on the expansive bookshelves that lined the entire room. He’d seen a few Agatha Christie novels, but he didn’t really think those were very close to what he specialized in. Lecter didn’t seem the type to enjoy horror, but Will of all people knew appearances were not always reliable for this. He’d seen plenty of people enjoy horror who didn’t seem the type.

“So it would seem,” Lecter agreed, “One of my other patients has mentioned you before. They have said the things you write are wonderfully horrific.”

Will considered that. His immediate reaction to the comment was suspicion that Lecter shouldn’t have told him because it had been something told to him by another patient. He pushed that aside, deciding Lecter probably knew the rules better than he did. Then, he smiled, because he liked that description of his writing.

“I’ll have to remember that one,” he said, “I’ve certainly heard worse.”

Lecter tipped his head and Will wondered if the man was trying to figure out if he should read the books for himself, to see if he would enjoy them. Will would normally have encouraged anyone to expand their palette with some good horror, but he wasn’t sure how Lecter might react to finding out what exactly lurked in Will’s mind.

“How else has your writing been described?” the man asked, and Will shrugged.

“Disturbing, worrying, sadistic, psychologically fascinating,” he listed, almost laughing, “that last one was from a psychiatrist who still sometimes tries to coerce me into letting him psychoanalyze me. He’s had to be satisfied with just reading what I write and trying to figure me out from that.”

Lecter hummed in consideration.

“While I imagined there is some merit to that approach, I expect he is likely to fall short of truly understanding you.”

Will nodded, glad the man hadn’t just offered to read his books to get a more well rounded perspective of his mind. He still hadn’t decided if he wanted Lecter to read his books or not.

“I doubt he’ll come up with anything worth my time,” Will said, “I’ve read some of his stuff before, and I don’t agree with him on almost any point. I don’t know how he got the job he

has."

"He doesn't practice privately?" Lecter asked, and Will almost laughed.

"No," he said, "I think he may have been smart enough to realize that wasn't a realistic option for him. No. This one is the head of the Baltimore State Hospital for the Criminally Insane."

Understanding dawned on Lecter's face, along with a smile that Will would best describe as somewhat mocking.

"Ah, Frederick Chilton," Lecter said, "had I known he was the one we were speaking of, I would have not hesitated to agree with you wholeheartedly. I do hope you will keep that between us, though."

Will grinned.

"If I had known you'd made his acquaintance, I might not have brought him up. It feels more like gossip if we both know the man," Will said.

Lecter's expression remained amused, and Will wondered what Chilton might have done to earn this kind of reaction from the man. In his mind's eye, Will could see Chilton rambling on about his "expertise" in the psychiatric field, being mildly insulting to the degree that it became blatantly rude. Or perhaps he tried to cling to Lecter, attempting to pass Lecter's intelligence off as his own. Both were equally likely, in Will's mind, and he even thought the man would be capable of some bizarre hybrid of the two. Will certainly wouldn't have put it past him.

"Gossiping *is* rather rude," Lecter agreed, a strange sparkle in his eye that made Will frown.

Will studied his psychiatrist, possibly for the first time. His first session he had been far too out of it to really see the man clearly, and now he was realizing just how much he had missed.

Lecter held himself with the casual grace of a lounging tiger, as if he was truly a predator who just happened to be sated and comfortable at the moment. As if he was a great threat when hungry or angry. His chosen apparel, today a light blue suit with a cream shirt and a floral tie, actually seemed to conceal a toned physique with an indefinite strength underneath. If Will had to guess, he would say Lecter could take him down in a fight, easily, but that he didn't want anyone to know that. It was strange, especially considering everything else he guessed about the man.

"You don't like rudeness," Will realized, "That's your thing. Discourtesy is unspeakably ugly to you."

In the moment after he said it, before Lecter replied, Will thought back to his first session, trying to figure out if he had been rude at all. To his surprise, and no small amount of relief, he realized he'd actually behaved well.

“While I am not entirely sure what you mean by it being “my thing”, it is true that I generally abhor rudeness,” Lecter agreed, watching Will with fascination, “I would ask how you could have known, but you would tire of that eventually.”

Will shrugged. Asking how he knew things was better than getting angry at him for knowing them. He’d take curiosity over anger any day.

“I just finally took the time to actually look at you,” he confessed, “and I started figuring you out a bit.”

Lecter nodded, considering that for a moment.

“Do you see me as a psychiatrist, or as a person?” he asked.

Will was stunned, and he didn’t know how to answer that. He just stared dumbly at Lecter until the man took mercy on him and explained.

“I have an idea you see the two as having slightly different definitions,” Lecter offered, “at least in regards to your experience. So I am curious. Did you come here today for therapy, or simply a conversation?”

Will thought about that for a long moment, non longer at a loss for words, but merely selecting which to use. He felt peculiarly exposed by the way Lecter had set it all out in the open like that. Never before had anyone cut right to the core of Will’s reasoning.

Will, despite feeling exposed, did not feel threatened. He believed Lecter truly was just curious, and his answer wouldn’t fundamentally change the nature of their interactions.

Will was also surprised by what he found was the honest answer to the question.

“You’re a person,” he admitted, somewhat sheepishly, “this is just a conversation.”

Will didn’t know how to expect Lecter to react to that. He might be concerned, forcing the issue of keeping a professional distance between them, or he could be pleased, seeing this as proof he had done his job well and made Will comfortable with him.

Lecter smiled warmly, and Will got the feeling neither of those potential reasons had been correct.

“In that case, you are welcome to call me Hannibal,” the man said, “and we can become something closer to friendly than doctor and patient, if you would like.”

Will frowned.

“Isn’t there some kind of code of ethics that you’re supposed to follow, and which would make that a bit questionable?” he asked.

Lecter tipped his head, raising one shoulder in a kind of elegant shrug.

“Unorthodox, perhaps,” he said, “but we have already established that is not a hindrance to me.”

13

Will was feeling like some poor, unidentifiable bit of roadkill.

He was covered in sweat and his head felt like it was fixing to split in two at any moment. He thought it was unlikely a goddess would spring forth if it did, and more likely a serial killer or a fully printed and bound book. The two things that could live and thrive within his head.

Will thought he might have a fever, but he couldn't find a thermometer. He couldn't even remember if he owned a working one.

Regardless, Will just swallowed some Aspirin for the headache and began translating his notes from his session with Doctor Lecter. Hannibal.

Will was confused to find the things he had written were not of a dark nature. At least, not nearly as dark as what he usually came up with. He had written the beginning of what he could easily turn into a short story, about mushrooms. He could see where it was headed, and though it was perhaps somewhat eerie, it was not as gruesome as even the tamest of his novels. The atmosphere of the story was more fitting a fairytale, albeit an original from the brother's Grimm. It was whimsical and strange, and likely more than a bit disturbing, but he thought it just might be good. There was something fascinating about it that made him want to write the entire thing out.

Will considered the fact that he might be feverish, and decided to postpone any writing until he was feeling better.

When Will got sick enough he got a fever, he acted strange and his writing ranged from complete gibberish to entirely bizarre surrealist comedy. Neither of those were of any use to him, and just served to bewilder him when he was coherent again.

If Will had a fever now, he didn't think his thinking was too impaired. He did recognize, though, that he never knew his thinking was impaired until after the fact.

Will pulled up the news on his computer, needing something to do other than write or go outside where he might catch a further chill. He skimmed through articles for a bit before he saw a picture that took his breath away.

Will recognized it immediately as something that had sprouted from his own head. In the novel he was most proud of to that point, Icarus Sky, the killer had grafted a man into a tree and replaced his organs with poisonous plants. Will had detailed exactly how the body had been displayed, and which flowers had been the stand in for what organs. He had described how the man's arms had been stretched up and out in the tree, and even the man's physical appearance.

If Will didn't know better, he would have thought he was dreaming this entire thing. But he knew how his dreams felt, and this was reality.

Will picked up his phone and dialed Beverly, the only thing he could think of to do.

“Hey, Will,” she greeted, sounding a bit distracted, “what’s up?”

“Have you read Icarus Sky?” Will asked without preamble, just to see if he would have to explain himself.

Beverly huffed softly and then Will heard some background noise as she pulled the phone away from her face to talk to someone.

“You know I don’t read horror,” she said, “why do you ask?”

Will took a deep breath and closed his eyes, trying to figure out exactly how crazy he might sound.

“You’ve seen the news, right? The dead guy in the tree?”

Beverly was quiet for a long moment, possibly wondering what Will was getting at.

“I’m in the labs right now,” she said, “we’re trying to figure out what to make of him.”

That, at least, was something Will could work off of. If she was on the case, she could be useful for this.

“Good. I think I have something that can help. Get a copy of Icarus Sky, and turn to page two hundred and three. About halfway down, there’s a paragraph that starts with the word Poetic. Start there, and read for about two pages. I know I sound crazy, and I might be a bit feverish, but I had to tell you.”

Beverly was quiet for another moment, and Will guessed she was writing down his instructions so she wouldn’t forget.

“You gonna tell me what I’m gonna find when I read your book?” she asked.

Will shook his head, though he knew she couldn’t see it. He really was feeling ill, but he couldn’t be sure if that wasn’t entirely the fault of this situation.

“I think it’ll be easier to believe if I don’t try to explain,” he said, “but after you read it, I need you to tell me if I’m crazy or not. Please.”

Beverly agreed, but had to get off the phone quickly. Will hoped she would take him seriously, but he also knew she probably would. She was the only person he really trusted would take him seriously when he asked her to.

He didn’t have to worry about how she would find a copy of his book, because she always had a few copies of each of them in her car. She’d explained it as her being prepared in case she could sell them or give them away to someone, therefore spreading the word and his work. He’d always thought she was crazy for that, but now he was grateful for her slightly strange habit.

Will's phone went off, and he automatically stood up and went to the kitchen. He made himself some toast, smothered in honey, and waited for Beverly to call him back.

It didn't take long. Fifteen minutes at most, though it could have been a week by Will's internal clock. Waiting for good news made time slow, but Will found that waiting for horrible news made time absolutely crawl. If he believed in a god, perhaps he would have thought this was one of their cruel jokes, stretching the terror and anticipation out.

"Graham," Will said when he answered, out of habit but also because he was more than likely experiencing some level of shock.

"Will. This is not good. My boss is going to want you in here for questioning. Just cooperate. There's no reason for them to suspect you, but they might act like it if they think you have an idea of what's going on. I'll contact a lawyer for you, because you absolutely should not talk to anyone without one."

Will sighed.

"What, no faith in your colleagues?" he asked, though he wasn't really in a joking mood. It was probably a coping mechanism.

"I'd like to say I trust them in this, but I'm not that dumb. Just don't say anything without the lawyer, okay?" she said, and Will heard a note of defeat in her voice.

It made him frown as he felt a pang of guilt, but he knew this wasn't really his fault. She would have given him Hell if he hadn't called her absolutely first thing.

"Yeah. Alright. Anything you think I should know before going in?" he asked.

Beverly gave her own tired sigh.

"Just that this is bound to be one hell of a circus, and you're about to be a starring act."

Will felt his throat start to grow raw and sore, knowing he definitely had a cold coming on, and he dreaded all the talking he would have to do. He hoped they would go easy on him, as Beverly had said they might, but he knew from how she'd said it that the chances were likely lower than twenty five percent.

The lawyer Bev had sent was smart, polite, and confident. She had taken one look at Will, pale and sweaty as he was, and decided that was something she could work with. She'd explained how things were likely to go, concisely, and without dumbing anything down. Will was glad to be treated like a person, but he wondered if she would treat him the same way if she'd actually read any of his books. Especially the one that had apparently gotten him into this mess.

Catherine Meadows sat adjacent to Will at the interview table, making it clear she was on his side but giving him an open view of her in case they needed to communicate at any point during the interview.

The agent who walked in, a file and a copy of Will's book in hand, was large and confident. His presence didn't so much command the room as fill it. Will imagined he would have a strong voice that could reach booming when he was upset. His suit wasn't tailored, and the sleeves were just a touch too long, and Will imagined he had four identical suits in his closet. High enough quality to not raise any eyebrows, but cheap enough to have bought them all at once and been done with it.

Will had just enough time to see all of that before the man spoke with almost exactly the voice Will had imagined.

"I'm Agent Crawford," he said frankly, sitting down across from Will, setting the file on the table and the book on top, "I'd like to ask you some questions."

So this was Jack. Beverly had mentioned him a few times, and Will had built a mental picture of the man in his mind. He honestly found reality to be lacking, as the real agent Crawford was shorter than the imagined version, and had a gap between his front teeth that, while not necessarily detracting from his authoritative air, certainly did him no favors.

Will looked to Catherine for only a moment before he nodded.

"I want to help as much as I can," he answered honestly, "That's why I called. When I saw the picture on the news, I could hardly believe it."

Will could see, in that moment, that he was some kind of suspect in the man's eyes. Jack either believed Will had done it, or had been directly involved in planning it.

And was that so far from the truth?

Will may not have ever lifted a finger against the dead man, but he had written a detailed description of what would happen to him. That description had fallen into the hands of someone who had then made it a reality. In some ways, Will thought he might be more to blame than the actual killer.

"I'll admit, when Katz came to me with this book, I was full of my own doubts," Crawford agreed with a nod, "but with the amount of detail you go into, it's hard to deny the connection."

Will had a sudden flash of insight, and he grimaced.

"Someone vomited," he said, "you had the whole team read it, and someone didn't have the stomach. My books aren't for everyone, Agent."

That may have been a mistake. Will could see the confusion and anger battle across Jack's features as he tried to make sense of what Will had just said. He also saw the way Catherine's head bowed fractionally, as if she wanted to hand it in despair. He had just made a mistake, and they hadn't even gotten to the questions yet.

"No," Crawford agreed, though his pretense of friendliness was dropping, "I can see that. Your books are not for everyone. Just for psychopaths that want to play out the sick things

you put in them."

Will felt anger bubble up inside him. He had called them. He was trying to help. And he was being met with the same dimestore psychoanalysis and judgment he had heard from psychiatrists from the time he was thirteen.

Despite this, and probably more for Catherine's sake than his own, Will tried to calm himself. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath, and thought how much fun this would be to rehash with Hannibal. Will was sure the doctor would be on his side. Jack was being rude.

"I apologize," Will said carefully, "I meant no disrespect by my comment. I'm feeling a bit under the weather, and I tend to speak more freely when I'm ill. I hope you will forgive me."

Catherine's chin tipped up, and he knew he'd just made the right move. The expression of mixed anger and despair on Jack's face when he realized he couldn't justify the way he wanted to treat Will also gave him some level of satisfaction.

"Of course," Jack said, cooling down a bit himself, though he didn't offer his own apology for what he had said about Will's books. Will would remember it. "If you could help me figure out who may have wanted to do this, I would be very grateful."

Will honestly doubted if gratitude would factor into what Jack felt if he caught the killer. Self-satisfaction and righteous pride seemed more likely, but Will also knew it would not be wise to argue this point with the man.

So, Will just nodded amiable, feeling as if he could have made a career out of acting if he managed to get through this interview without snapping.

"I'm sorry to say it, but the suspect pool is fairly large," Will said, "I don't have the exact numbers off the top of my head, but I'd say at least half the adult population of Baltimore reads my books. Then, you'd have to factor in nearby areas, people who might have traveled here from out of state, and if they got my books secondhand, it could be near impossible to track them down. That book came out almost four years ago, so it's really difficult to tell."

Jack pinched the bridge of his nose. Will could tell he was trying not to direct his anger at Will. If her posture was anything to go by, Catherine knew it too, and she was preparing to defend Will and get him out of there the moment anything escalated. Will hoped it wouldn't come to that.

"What about a stalker?" Jack asked, "A psycho fan."

Will shrugged and shook his head.

"A fan, obviously, but I've taken precautions against stalkers. They would have a hard time stalking me if they wanted to, and they haven't contacted me if they are."

Will glanced at the file, as yet unopened on the table.

"Well, not directly, anyway," he amended.

Jack huffed unhappily, and Will knew he was far from convinced. He probably wouldn't be convinced Will was telling the truth until he actually caught the guy, and even then Will was doubtful.

"Care to explain what measures you've taken in order to avoid getting a stalker?" Jack asked, pulling a pen from his pocket and clicking it smartly.

Will imagined anything he said would be cross referenced and verified. While he appreciated the efficiency and effort, he inwardly sighed. Having Beverly Katz as his best friend hadn't seemed to earn him any brownie points with her boss.

Will spent the next few hours talking to Agent Crawford. He began by explaining how he had protected himself against the potential of stalkers.

The dustcovers of his books stated he lived in Baltimore, despite the fact that he lived in the woods of a nearby city. Any fan wanting to send him mail was directed to a PO box that was periodically emptied by Beverly when she brought him the mail in order for him to decide if any of it was worth reading. The only person who knew his actual address was Beverly, as far as he knew. Even Alana had never been invited over.

After Will explained all that to Jack, who seemed neither impressed nor even mildly convinced, Will answered his questions to the best of his ability. Catherine chimed in every now and then to tell him when he didn't have to answer a certain question, or to scold Jack for asking something he really had no right to.

By the end of the interview, Will could tell Jack's ire had been mostly redirected toward Catherine, and he decided she was worth whatever fee he was paying for her being there. Whatever it was, he was sure it wasn't enough to make up for Jack's anger.

Will was exhausted, and his throat felt like he'd decided to swallow a handful of thumbtacks by the time the interview was over, but he headed to a store before he made his way home. He needed some medicine, a thermometer, and food Hannibal wouldn't grimace at the mere thought of for him to eat while he recovered.

14

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"How do you feel, having a gruesome murder from one of your books recreated, only a short time after you appeared in public?"

The recording device was shoved into his face, making Will pull back involuntarily. He recognized the red curls of one of his least favorite people.

He'd been ten steps from his car.

"I'm in public right now, and it *appears* you can see me," he snapped, too tired to feign professionalism with Freddie Lounds, of all people, "and you've got no business ambushing me."

Freddie, apparently pleased to have earned a reaction, pressed on. She continued to step in his way when he tried to move towards his car, and kept the recorder up to catch anything he might say.

"Did you know about the murder?" She asked, "it bears a striking resemblance to one you detailed in Icarus Sky."

Yeah , Will thought, *page two hundred and three, halfway down. I went on for nearly three pages describing that scene in all its horrific glory. Got about a hundred letters describing how people vomited their brains out after reading that.*

Aloud, he only said, "I'm not talking to you, Freddie."

Lounds still seemed unperturbed. Will managed to sidestep her and make it to his car, but she followed him. She continued to pelt him with questions as he fumbled with his keys and opened the trunk of his car. He nearly dropped his bags of groceries as he tried to shove them into his car, but he managed to keep anything from being damaged.

"Have the police talked with you? Are you a suspect?" she pressed. Her eyes were wide, as if she intended to drink in every detail of his appearance and his actions. Will thought the only thing that kept her from filming this entire thing was that she wouldn't be able to physically crowd him enough without making the video unusable.

Will cursed the fact that he had groceries, because he couldn't escape her as quickly as he would have liked.

"Was this the work of one of your fans? Will you stop writing, now that you've inspired a killer?"

Will turned to her as he shut the trunk of his car. He was annoyed, ill, and tired. He hadn't been able to write anything for nearly the whole day, and he wasn't even sure anything he

could write in this condition would be any good. All of that just added on to his mood, making him feel foul and sharp.

“I’m thinking the first victim of my next book is going to be a nosy reporter,” he said lowly, “so I’d be on my guard if I were you, Miss Lounds.”

Will finally got away, nearly passing out behind the wheel on his way home, but made it safely and carried the groceries inside before collapsing into bed.

Hannibal found himself peculiarly impatient.

Under normal circumstances, Hannibal found he had vast reserves of patience. He had always been able to wait for things, and it had served him well all his life.

But now, with only a few days left before Will’s next appointment, Hannibal dearly wanted to know what he had thought of the scene.

It was quite possibly Hannibal’s favorite of all the deaths in Will’s books. The beauty of it had resonated within Hannibal from the first time he had read it, and he had wanted to bring life to Will’s art so badly. He had waited, as he always did, patiently, until the time came when he felt he was in the right position to finally see Will’s vision come into reality. With Will as his patient, he had been in the position of hearing Will’s thoughts on such a work, but now they had reached an agreement of their terms meaning they were no longer so professional between each other. Now, Hannibal would have a chance to really know Will’s opinion. Not just what he would tell a psychiatrist.

And he was growing impatient to hear.

Hannibal was certain Will had seen the pictures by now. If he didn’t keep himself up to date on the news, Hannibal was sure his friend, Beverly, would have let him know the moment she found out. There had been an article, unfortunately written by Freddie Lounds, showing the connection between the death and Will’s book. Despite the reporter who had written it, Hannibal found it rather pleasant. She had sensationalized it, and Hannibal thought that apt. Will’s work was worthy of it.

And the pictures she had managed to get. They were beautiful. She had not framed them in a way that made his work seem wrong or evil. They showed what he had done exactly as he would have it seen. Hannibal was glad this was how Will would see it.

Hannibal wondered how Will had reacted to finding out something from his imagination had been brought into reality. Would he have gone to the authorities immediately, pointing out the connection this death had to his own work? Would he have stared in wonder for a moment, amazed by the similarities between the image on the page and what he had seen in his mind? Would he have been horrified, frightened by the idea someone would want to bring his fantasy to life?

Hannibal was anxious to know the answer.

Hannibal brought up the site, Tattlecrime, and perused the news for that day. He found the title tasteless, and the reporting more so. But he couldn't deny the draw it had due to the fact Freddie Lounds managed to get information she had no right finding.

The newest article caught Hannibal's attention, and he frowned.

Freddie had cornered Will and tried to get a comment from him. Hannibal could tell by the things he had said, he had not been feeling particularly well. He had likely been tired, if exhausted by whatever he had done in reaction to discovering the scene. Hannibal was surprised Freddie had managed to catch him, as it was uncommon for Will to ever be out of his house. At least without his best friend/bodyguard, Beverly Katz.

Regardless, Hannibal couldn't help smiling at Will's parting remark. Of course, Lounds had framed it as a direct threat on her life, and Hannibal had no doubt the authorities would be very interested in speaking with Will now, if they hadn't already.

Hannibal was impressed by Will's restraint. Stressed and tired as he must have been, he'd said remarkably little to the journalist, and had remained mostly civil.

Hannibal wanted to sift through Will's mind, plunge his hands into it until he was up to his elbows in Will's thoughts. He had only a few days to wait, though it felt like an eternity stretching out before him. If he had waited a few more weeks, or felt Will had opened up more, Hannibal would have called under the guise of talking about what had happened. As it was, he knew he would have to be content waiting until their next session.

Hannibal printed the article and the one before it, deciding his patient's involvement was a good enough excuse to allow himself this. He could even offer to annotate them both with Will during a session to show they really were for therapy's sake.

The papers went into a folder and into his briefcase, and Hannibal went about making dinner. He would have liked to share what he had taken from the dead man with Will, but they had not yet reached that stage of intimacy. He hoped the next one would be something they could share, and was satisfied that someday Will might knowingly share the hunt.

"What the hell were you thinking?" Beverly all but shouted through the phone, "Jack's about ready to skin me alive, and Meadows has already given me an earful about how difficult it's going to be to dig you out of this hole you put yourself in."

Will coughed instead of speaking, trying to clear his throat so he wouldn't end up croaking out his words. The cough caught and turned into an entire fit. He felt a tugging behind his sternum, and he had a vision of one of his lungs breaking free, inverting itself, and coming up his throat in a bloody pink mass of flesh.

He was no doctor, but he thought two things about the image. One: it was probably not possible. Two: it would certainly be a harbinger of his own death if it were to happen.

Will finally managed to stop coughing and pull in a long breath that he felt vibrate his lungs, reminding him of a death rattle, which was another unwelcome thought at this point in time. He didn't have the energy to say anything now, or even open his eyes for that matter, but Beverly didn't seem to need him to.

"I'll be damned," she said, her tone far softer now, almost hushed, "You're *really* sick. I've got no right to yell at you right now. I'll let you rest. Don't worry. I'll handle it as well as I can. Text me if you need anything and I'll even bail on work to come."

Will made a soft sound of agreement rather than try talking again. Beverly told him firmly to get better, then ended the call.

Will dropped his phone onto the bed next to him. He heard it bounce and fall of the edge onto the floor somewhere, but he ignored it. He turned onto his back and felt his sinuses draining down the back of his throat. He hated that feeling, and now he couldn't breathe, so he turned to his other side and groped for a box of tissues among the plethora of already used and crumpled ones littering the bedside table.

Will opened his eyes to aid the search, just in time to see the whole room light up with a flash as lightning struck somewhere out in the woods. As if on cue, the wind picked up and slammed sheets of rain against the side of his house.

Will grabbed the box and pulled it into the bed with him, heedless of the small avalanche of used tissues he knocked onto the floor. He held the box close to his chest, and his mind decided to try its hand at romantic comedy.

"My, Tissues, you sure look swell tonight. Come here and keep me warm a spell."

His mind provided this absurd thought a voice like a dandy from the old movies. When they had sound, but were still working on the color.

And the thought *was* absurd. Will was likely his own furnace under his three quilts, he tended to run very hot, but there wouldn't be anything to keep him warm. The fire was nearly out, and the pile of wood had already been spent.

Another thought floated in, but it slipped away before Will could truly think it. He couldn't go out and chop more, now. Everything would be soaked past useless.

Will used about six tissues, letting them begin to accumulate in the bed beside him, as the reach to the bedside table was more than he could stand. When his airway was at least halfway clear enough to be acceptable, he let himself drift off into sleep.

Chapter End Notes

In case anyone is wondering, I'm modelling Will's behavior/thought processes after my own when I am ill. When I have a fever, all bets are off. So if it seems weird, that's

because I get really weird when I'm sick.
<3

15

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

When Hannibal opened the door to an empty waiting room, he was far more disappointed than he would readily admit. He considered Will to be a punctual man, at the very least, and had never considered that he might be late. He understood Will didn't go out much, and had therefore assumed he didn't need to worry about conflicts in his schedule.

Yet Will was not there.

Hannibal waited, checking to see if he had any messages, though he knew he had not neglected to check earlier if he had missed anything.

When half an hour had passed, Hannibal decided it was prudent to call Will. They were something approaching friends, after all, so it would not be uncouth for him to check in after Will missed their session.

Hannibal dialed Will's number, but the line went directly to voicemail. So Will either had his phone turned off, was currently talking to someone else, or he had neglected to charge it. That was yet another cause for concern, and Hannibal was genuinely worried at this point.

He had two more options available to him, and he decided on an order in which to go about pursuing them.

He called Beverly Katz.

"Hello, this is Beverly Katz."

"Good evening. I am terribly sorry to bother you. This is Doctor Lecter. You are listed as Will Graham's emergency contact, and I have not been able to reach him. He has missed our usual appointment, and I was wondering if you have any idea as to why that may be."

The sounds of distant activity came through the phone, and Hannibal waited for Katz to reply. He guessed she was still at work, and he wondered what it was she did. He was glad she had answered him despite being busy, regardless.

"Oh, yeah," Katz said, sounding distracted, "Will's sick. I talked to him yesterday, but he couldn't talk to me. He probably feels like death warmed up. When he gets sick he gets a bit weird, so he probably just forgot to let you know he couldn't come. I'm sorry, but I'm really busy so I'm going to have to let you go."

Hannibal frowned.

"I understand," he said, "however, I would ask one more thing of you."

Katz hummed inquisitively into the phone, likely reading something. Hannibal could hear other voices around her.

“I used to be a doctor. Do you think Will would find it inappropriate or intrusive if I were to stop by to check on him?”

There was a long pause, and Hannibal wondered if she understood his question. He wouldn’t have asked, except he wanted to be able to claim he had some sort of permission to visit Will. Hannibal thought it unlikely her answer would have much bearing on how he acted, but he was curious to see.

“He said he thinks of you as more of a friend than a shrink,” Katz said at length, and Hannibal was glad to hear it, “so it shouldn’t be too weird. I would go over myself, but everything’s gone to hell here at work and I haven’t hardly had time to sit down in the past week. I’d feel so much better if I knew someone was checking on him. Will you at least let me know how he’s doing?”

Hannibal smiled, now. She was all but begging him to go. If it came down to it, Hannibal could shift the blame to her. He didn’t think it would, but he was glad to have the option available.

“Of course. I am sorry to have kept you, but I am grateful to you for your help. I am in your debt.”

Katz laughed lightly.

“No problem. Thanks for checking on Will. Talk to you later.”

The call ended, and Hannibal packed up. He intended to bring Will something to eat, as he doubted Will had been properly feeding himself despite Hannibal’s advice. Furthermore, Will should be resting, and not expending energy on cooking or deciding what to eat. Hannibal would have preferred to feed Will for the first time under different circumstances, but he thought there was a certain poetry to this. He would be providing care for Will, and depending on his current status Will might truly need some care.

Hannibal wondered how ill Will would have to be in order to forget to cancel his session. He knew it could reasonably be nothing of much concern, but Will had been functioning while severely sleep deprived, so he thought this level of disfunction could be something to think about.

Hannibal allowed himself to be concerned for Will, but he also recognized his luck in this situation. He had permission to go to Will’s home. He had been looking for an opportunity where he might be able to find an excuse to do so, and this had presented itself far earlier than Hannibal had expected.

Hannibal had Will’s actual address, because Will had filled out all the necessary paperwork to begin therapy. Hannibal had noted he didn’t live in Baltimore as the About the Author sections at the back of his books claimed. It was clever of Will, leaving something of a false trail for any potential stalkers or far too dedicated fans. In all of Hannibal’s research, he had

not been able to find any clues as to where Will really lived. Pure divine intervention had led Will to Hannibal's office, and provided Hannibal with this chance.

Hannibal packed his medical bag with supplies and thermal containers of warm soup, sliding the folder in alongside them in case he had the opportunity to speak with Will about them. He also brought some thick blankets and tea. He doubted he would need these, but he always thought it apt to be prepared.

The weather was terrible, and Hannibal thought it unlikely anyone else would have braved the backwoods road in such conditions. He wondered if Will would be stranded out in his home during the rainy season, though he thought it likely Will would neither have noticed such a situation or much cared, cut off from the world as he always was.

But if Will required help during those times, Hannibal thought, what would he do? He would be alone, isolated, and possibly unable to help himself.

There was no use dwelling on such things, but Hannibal could not stop his own wondering.

Finally, Hannibal stopped his car at the front of a rustic cabin. It appeared old, but not neglected. Hannibal wondered when Will had the time to care for a home when he hardly allowed enough time to care for himself.

Hannibal carried his bag up the front steps, onto a large front deck. The windows had no curtains, or they had been drawn back and out of view. Through one, Hannibal could see into the house. There was a desk with a laptop in the center, surrounded by jars of pens and notebooks. Right up next to the window was an armchair. Not the kind one would lounge in, but one that would be comfortable if one decided to work from it. Next to it was a small table with yet another jar of pens and a stack of notebooks.

Hannibal was interested to see the rest of the house, to gain that level of insight into Will's mind.

Hannibal knocked and waited. He could not hear any movement from within, but the wind was howling and the rain was pouring, so he doubted he would even hear a gunshot from out there. He knocked again, but no longer expected an answer.

The door was unlocked, and he wondered if Will was in the habit of leaving it that way or had merely forgotten due to being sick. He supposed Will might not see a need to lock it, being as secluded as he was, but it still made him frown.

Hannibal shut the door behind him, not bothering to be quiet as he had knocked and the wind howling would have made it clear the door had been opened to anyone who might be within.

Hannibal looked towards the window and the chair. Something he hadn't been able to see from outside were two large bookshelves. One was filled from floor to ceiling with novels, though none of Will's were present. They were stuffed on, even a few having been laid across the tops of the other books when Will had apparently run out of room.

The other bookshelf was even more of a wonder to Hannibal, because it was equally packed with notebooks. The type of notebook varied greatly, but Hannibal could tell most were of the less expensive variety. Hannibal imagined they must all be full with Will's hurried hand, and thought many must have been given to him as gifts. In that way, Will would be easy to shop for when a holiday came around, Hannibal supposed, because he would always need more notebooks and they would certainly be put to use.

Hannibal believed Will would be genuinely pleased to receive a notebook, and wouldn't begrudge the lack of imagination in such a gift. It also amused him that he had unwittingly contributed to that tradition.

Hannibal walked through to the kitchen, something small and modest, but entirely suitable. He set his bag down on the table and set out to find Will. He was sure the man was home.

Hannibal didn't have to search long, because he found Will's bedroom quickly.

The moment he opened the door, Hannibal could smell the illness. There was nothing of great concern in that scent, but it was clear Will was sick.

The second thing he noticed was that this room was no warmer than the rest of the house, which was colder than Hannibal considered conducive to healing. He cast his eyes around and drank in the entire room.

There was a fireplace, which had clearly been used, though no longer radiated any heat. Another bookshelf was in this room, beside the bed, and it also contained notebooks rather than published novels. There was space on the shelves for more books, and Hannibal wondered if this was where the most recent writing would be. There was a veritable mountain of used tissues on the bedside table, and a smaller one on top of the covers on the bed. Will was not visible, just a large lump under several quilts, even his head buried under them in an attempt to conserve warmth.

Hannibal thought by the deep nature of the somewhat regular breaths that Will was awake. He remembered Beverly had said Will gets "weird" when he's ill, but Hannibal had yet to discover exactly what that meant.

Hannibal walked over to the bed and considered what to do. He worried about frightening Will, but there was hardly a protocol for this kind of situation.

Hannibal crouched down by the bed so he would be just about eye level with Will.

"Will," he called gently, "I've come to check on you."

The lump on the bed shifted, and the edge of the blanket lifted up. Hannibal felt a waft of warm air hit his face with a fresh wave of that sickly smell. Hannibal smiled when his eyes were met with Will's luminous blue ones.

"There you are," he said.

Chapter End Notes

Anyone up for a few chapters of Hannibal taking care of Will? I sure hope so. <3

16

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"Come, Will, sit up," Hannibal said gently, setting the soup onto the bedside table as he helped the man.

Hannibal had cleaned up a bit before bringing the food in, throwing away all those used tissues first, and had given Will a short once over to figure out exactly what he was dealing with. Will had a high fever, though nothing that would leave him hospitalized at this point. His breathing sounded awful, but again nothing bad enough to warrant a trip anywhere. Will's nose was red and agitated from being rubbed at with the abundance of tissues, and his eyes were rimmed with red in a way only the fevered could be. But those blue eyes were still so full of intelligence and sharp wit.

Will moved slowly, clearly weak and weighed down by illness, but he managed to sit up in the bed. Hannibal propped pillows behind him so the position wouldn't be too much of a strain, and brushed his hair out of his face. Will pressed his hot face into Hannibal's hand, and Hannibal knew the coolness of his skin must be soothing to him. Hannibal smiled kindly and reclaimed his hand to feed the soup to Will.

Hannibal would have to find firewood to get this room to a livable temperature, but he intended to get some soup into Will first and foremost. He hadn't seen any fresh dishes or food, and doubted Will had even been able to think about feeding himself in the state he was in.

When the first container of soup was halfway gone, Will seemed to be feeling mildly better. At least to the point where he could talk.

"Damn, that's delicious," Will sighed, his voice still rough as he stared at Hannibal, "I think I need a prescription for this stuff."

Hannibal smiled warmly.

"I'm glad you're enjoying it, Will," he said, "I made it myself."

Will stared at him with open wonder, and Hannibal realized Will's emotions were entirely bare in this state. Will usually had some level of control over how he showed his thoughts, but while fevering he didn't seem to have that function.

"Another tally to the magical psychiatrist count," Will said, and Hannibal huffed a laugh. He doubted Will would actually call it something like that, if there even was such a thing, but he was flattered Will thought of him so highly.

"You mustn't speak so much," Hannibal admonished, "you will hurt your throat. Furthermore, you must save your strength. You are very ill."

Will nodded, his hair falling back into his face with the motion, but he didn't seem to even notice it.

"I'll say. Madame tissue box was keeping me company when the fire went out."

With that, Will descended into a fit of giggles, tugging the said box of tissues closer to him in the bed. Hannibal decided this must mean something to Will that Hannibal didn't understand, so elected to leave it be for the time.

"Eat more," Hannibal instructed, and Will obediently accepted the spoon into his mouth.

Will hadn't the energy to feed himself, barely able to lift his hands up off the bed when asked to do so, but Hannibal was content with feeding him this way. It meant he was able to keep a close eye on every one of Will's symptoms, and be sure no accident occurred.

When the bowl was empty, Will certainly looked better than he had when Hannibal had arrived. There was color in his cheeks and a clearness to his eyes that had been slightly glassed over before. Hannibal set the empty container on the bedside table again and helped Will to move back into a laying position. Hannibal pulled the quilts up to Will's chin, and made sure to set the tissue box within his reach. Will looked at the box like it was speaking to him and he was listening intently. Hannibal couldn't be sure that wasn't what was happening, but he decided he would have to keep an eye on this side of Will's illness.

Then, Hannibal went in search of firewood.

There was no pile near the fireplace in the main part of the house, nor in any of the other rooms. Hannibal didn't remember seeing one on the front deck, so he went to the back of the house to check.

There was another deck on the back of the house, overlooking the woods. The wind had died down a bit, but the rain was still coming down in buckets and Hannibal wondered if his car would get stuck in the mud.

There was a pile of wood to his left. It wasn't large, and likely wouldn't last even for the rest of the day, but it was better than nothing. Hannibal carried what he could back into the house and to Will's room.

The sight he was met with stopped Hannibal in his tracks, making him stare in bewilderment.

"Will, why are you laying on the floor?" he asked calmly, unsure what to make of this.

Will looked up from his cocoon of blankets at the foot of his bed, not even near the cold fireplace if he had somehow reasoned he should move closer to it. His blue eyes shone up at Hannibal from under his unruly curls that likely hadn't been washed in at least a week, yet still looked as stunning as ever.

"I was cold," Will said simply.

Hannibal set the wood down by the fireplace. He didn't take his eyes off of Will for more than a moment, still curious as to what the man was thinking by moving out of his bed and

laying on the hard floor while he was ill.

“So you thought you should move to the floor,” he said carefully.

Will nodded. He didn’t seem to see anything strange about the situation.

“Is the floor meant to be warmer than the bed?” Hannibal asked.

Will’s eyes filled with confusion, and his expression seemed to ask just why Hannibal thought that had anything to do with anything. As if his actions made perfect sense.

It was apparent simple reason was somewhat beyond Will at this point. This must be what Beverly had meant by Will getting weird.

“Why don’t you move back to the bed so I can build a fire and warm you up?” Hannibal offered.

Will didn’t have to move in order for Hannibal to build a fire, but Hannibal didn’t think logic would get in the way of Will following the suggestion. It certainly hadn’t gotten in the way of Will deciding to lay on the floor.

Sure enough, Will wiggled up and into the bed, somehow not unraveling his cocoon of blankets. It was endearing and impressive, and it made Hannibal shake his head at the man.

Hannibal built a fire and decided to give Will some medicine. He didn’t know what Will had already taken, if anything, but he couldn’t smell anything on the man so he knew it had been long enough it would be safe to administer something now.

If nothing else, the medicine would help Will to sleep, and Hannibal wouldn’t have to worry about him laying on the floor again.

Will lay in the bed, drifting to sleep, and watching Hannibal through a haze of illness. Hannibal wondered if Will would remember acting strangely, or if this would be a blackout type of situation. He was curious to find out.

“You know,” Will said, the words nearly slurred in his sleep addled state, “I think you’re wearing a person suit.”

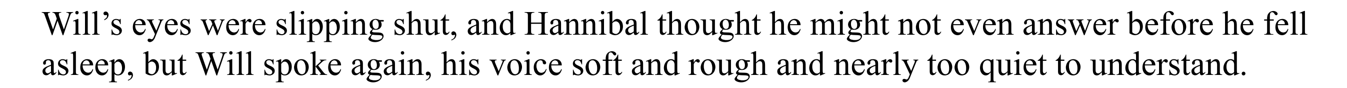
Hannibal tipped his head curiously, unsure what Will meant by that.

Will just nodded as if Hannibal had replied with something incredibly wise.

“It’s tailored, like all your suits, and it hides who you really are. You look normal, and no one can tell what you are.”

Hannibal leaned forward, interested in hearing what Will meant by this. He knew it was dangerous to let Will see him clearly, but he didn’t think there was much he could to to stop the man. Will was incredibly perceptive.

“And what am I, Will?” he asked softly.


Will’s eyes were slipping shut, and Hannibal thought he might not even answer before he fell asleep, but Will spoke again, his voice soft and rough and nearly too quiet to understand.

“You’re dangerous.”

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter is longer, and so much fun in my opinion. XD More weirdness to come.

17

Will opened his eyes and saw just about the strangest thing he had could have imagined.

Hannibal was sitting in a chair by the fireplace with a book in his lap. The fireplace was alive with a crackling fire that cast dynamic shifting light over the man's angular face, and Will wondered where he'd found firewood. He only now remembered that he had run out, and everything that had happened earlier.

Hannibal didn't seem to be reading the book, his eyes not scanning the lines in the way they would if he was reading. Instead, he seemed to be looking at what was in the book as a whole, and Will thought maybe it was a picture.

But after a moment, Will recognized the book. It wasn't an actual book. It was a notebook. One of his. From his bookshelf, where he put all his notebooks once they were full.

Will scrambled to sit up, ignoring the way his head ached at the movement and his vision swam. Hannibal looked up and smiled warmly as he snapped the notebook shut.

"How are you feeling, Will?" he asked.

"That's my notebook," Will said, not even hearing Hannibal's question before he spoke.

Hannibal looked at the notebook in his lap and nodded. He didn't look remotely embarrassed to have been caught with the notebook, instead he was merely understanding of Will's reaction.

"I do apologize. I suppose that is rather rude of me, but you must know I can't read it. I was merely admiring your script."

Will felt an enormous amount of relief when he realized Hannibal was right. Will knew no one could read his notes. Only Will knew what they said. He had done that on purpose, and he didn't have to worry.

Will flopped back down on the bed and swallowed, feeling the pain in his throat flare a bit with the action.

"Why are you here?" Will asked, closing his eyes because his eyelids felt too heavy.

"I have a twenty four hour cancellation policy," Hannibal replied simply.

Will laughed, but it turned into a coughing fit that had him curled up in the fetal position before he could finally breathe again. When the coughing stopped, Will groaned softly and shook his head.

"Sorry," he said, his throat raw and sore now, "I guess I forgot to tell you I'm sick."

A cool hand pressed to Will's forehead, and it felt like the heat was being leached from his skull through the contact. He sighed happily at the feeling, and hoped the hand wouldn't leave.

But it did.

"You are no longer feverish," Hannibal said, "which I believe is why you are coherent."

Will huffed softly, careful not to let himself get stuck in another coughing fit.

"Yeah. I get weird when I have a fever. I'm sorry if I said anything. I'm sorry if I say anything in the future, on that note."

Hannibal hummed softly and adjusted the blankets around Will's shoulders. It sparked a strange warmth in Will's chest, and he wasn't sure he wanted to examine it. He just wasn't used to being taken care of like this.

"Do you remember what has happened since I arrived?" Hannibal asked.

Will sighed and nodded.

"I remember laying on the floor when you left to find firewood," he confessed, feeling his face heat up further with a blush, "and I wish I could say that's the first time that's happened. Laying on the floor is a common thing for me when I'm ill. Apparently it seems like a good idea."

Hannibal huffed his own laugh.

"Rest assured, I'll not let you do anything you will regret. I will make you some tea, if you would like."

Will swallowed again, and decided that was probably a good idea. He didn't usually drink tea, but he guessed Hannibal knew what he was doing.

"Yeah," he said, "that would be nice. Thank you."

Hannibal squeezed Will's shoulder through the quilts briefly before he left the room.

Will dozed while Hannibal was gone, not enough energy to do anything else. He knew he wouldn't normally be so relaxed with someone else in his home, at least someone other than Beverly, but he didn't have the energy to be nervous. He would have to deal with all of that when he was better.

When Hannibal returned with the tea, Will scrambled to sit up without the man's help. He managed, though the slight fog in his head made his movements clumsy, and sat with his back propped up by the pillows.

Will felt embarrassed by his general frailty, but he didn't dare apologize just yet. He knew he'd be back to saying nonsense and trying to lay on the floor the moment the fever came back. This was the cycle of his illness.

Hannibal gently set the mug of tea on the bedside table, taking a moment to straighten the cover on the bed before he picked it back up and handed it to Will.

Will curled his hands around the mug, relishing the warmth that soaked into his hands from it. His fingers and toes always stayed cold when he was sick, while his head and face could have fried an egg.

Will knew many specific details of what happened when he was ill, but that never stopped him from being unprepared for it. He never expected to get sick, so when he did he was thrown into the same cycle he had known all his life.

“Thank you,” Will breathed, lifting the mug to his face so he could breath in the aromatic steam.

Hannibal nodded as if this was only what was expected of a psychiatrist/almost-sort of-friend. He pulled the chair over closer to the bed and resumed his seat. He put the notebook back into his lap, but didn’t open it this time. For a few moments, he just watched as Will took slow sips of the tea.

“I don’t have any teacups in the house,” Will said, “because I don’t normally drink tea. Never even crossed my mind to, actually.”

Hannibal smiled and tipped his head in the way he did when he was about to say something that could be perceived as somewhat mocking.

“You certainly have no lack of imagination, and logical thinking comes naturally to you,” Hannibal said mildly, “It’s interesting that something so simple as the health benefits of tea would evade you.”

Will huffed and took a swallow of the tea. It felt amazing and soothed his throat as it went down.

Then, something clicked.

“You used to be a doctor,” he said.

Hannibal raised his eyebrows and smiled as if he was about to say something particularly clever. But Will didn’t let him.

“A medical doctor,” he clarified, studying the man more intently, “a surgeon. I would guess emergency room, but I can’t be sure about that. There’s a fog in my head making my thoughts slow.”

Hannibal’s smile brightened.

“All of that is correct,” he confirmed, “and my point has been made. You are highly intelligent, yet never considered tea.”

Will scowled childishly at the man, taking a long drink from the mug as he stared him down.

“I can’t be expected to think of everything,” he pouted, “and some of us don’t have the advantage of medical school.”

Hannibal just hummed at that, smiling benignly as Will finished the tea.

His throat felt about ten times better, and Will could talk fine, but he felt the area around his eyes growing warmer in a way that meant the fever was coming back.

“How much firewood is left?” Will asked when Hannibal returned from taking the mug to the kitchen.

“Not nearly enough,” Hannibal admitted, “what you see here is the last of it. I would attempt to go into town and buy more, as everything around here will be waterlogged, but I fear I would not be able to get back to you, and I do not think you should be left alone in your condition.”

Will looked, and saw the pile by the fireplace really was dwindling. He also knew Hannibal was probably right. He couldn’t imagine the man had a car capable of dealing with this weather. It was a miracle he had made it here in the first place. Additionally, Will knew it was probably unwise for him to be on his own. He usually dealt with his illness by himself, but he clearly hadn’t been doing very well to this point.

“I’ll text Bev,” Will said, searching for his phone. He couldn’t remember where he had left it, but he usually kept it in the bed with him when he was sick.

Hannibal stood and walked around the bed where Will’s phone charger was plugged in.

“I found your phone on the floor when I arrived,” he said, unplugging it and handing it to Will, “it had run out of battery, so I took the liberty of charging it for you.”

Will nodded, wondering just how many liberties the man would feel comfortable taking. Hannibal being there at all made the situation rather bizarre, but he had somehow managed to avoid making Will feel uncomfortable about his presence. The nearest he had come was when he saw the man with his notebook, because he never let anyone read his notes. Hannibal had recovered from that with a peculiar grace that Will couldn’t begin to understand.

Will sent Beverly a text explaining the firewood situation, and she immediately replied saying she would bring some out. Will thanked her and put his phone down on the bed where he would be able to reach it.

“Why did you come here?” Will asked, looking up at Hannibal, who had just added a few pieces of wood to the fire from the dwindling pile. The man looked up from beside the fire, and his eyes seemed to turn to liquid gold the way the light caught them.

“You missed our appointment, and I could not reach you,” Hannibal replied, as if it was the most natural thing in the world.

Will coughed, and it thankfully didn’t turn into an entire fit this time.

“I already know that,” he said, “but that’s not why you came. You hardly know me, and it’s not even *close* to your responsibility to make sure I’m physically healthy. Most psychiatrists would have just waited another week to see if I showed up.”

Hannibal nodded, lifting himself off the floor and taking his seat by the bedside once more. He was quiet for a long time, watching the flame as he considered his answer. Will waited patiently, though he knew the building fever would make it difficult for him to think very soon.

“I was worried about you,” Hannibal said at last, his tone even and betraying nothing, “And I enjoy talking to you.”

Will’s dubious and bewildered expression must have made his own feelings clear, because Hannibal smiled lightly before he continued to speak.

“I do not often find I enjoy the company of anyone other than myself, other than in a general sense of enjoying company. I do not form attachments easily, or often. I think you may be the same way, at least towards those in my profession.”

Hannibal gave Will a pointed look, and Will remembered when Hannibal had asked if Will saw him as a psychiatrist or a person. The question had surprised him, as well as the insight it implied. Will hadn’t realized it might have been a form of self-recognition through another on Hannibal’s part. He was astounded by this revelation, and could do nothing but listen as Hannibal spoke.

“When you agreed to treat our relationship as more than professional, I realized how profoundly I would like to know you personally. If you are concerned by the speed at which I came to your aid, Miss Katz asked me to let her know how you are faring. I called her first.”

Will didn’t much care about that at the moment, though he knew he very well may at some later time. He was still reeling from the fact that Hannibal had been entirely genuine when he had offered Will a grounding friendship rather than a professional and transactional sort of relationship.

Will had known in the moment that at least part of what Hannibal had been saying was true, but he hadn’t thought for a moment the man might have been personally invested in Will’s response. People often said things like that without thinking about it first, and always came across as honest. Will could pick out a liar any time, but this was an honesty grey area.

The fever was creeping up on him, and Will felt its looming presence clouding his thoughts. It was like walking through cotton candy, the stuff not only blocking the way but also sticking and pulling at you as you pushed through.

“If I have overstepped my bounds, please let me know,” Hannibal said, and Will believed he was genuinely concerned.

Will shook his head, which felt like it had a stone helmet on it now.

“Don’t know yet,” he mumbled, “cotton candy… brain.”

Hannibal raised an eyebrow, and Will realized he had said something strange, but he couldn't piece together a sentence that would make more sense. He felt his head dropping down toward his chest, and he felt like the effort of lifting it back up wasn't worth it.

"You should sleep again, Will," Hannibal said gently, standing to help Will shift into a laying position again. He was smiling. "You have all the time in the world to think it over."

18

Chapter Summary

Beverly!!! <3 <3 <3

Beverly arrived, driving a car that was well equipped for the bad weather and road conditions. She blew in through the door with an armload of firewood, her hair hanging in wet strings around her face. She stopped immediately, blinking up at Hannibal.

“You must be Doctor Lecter,” she said after a moment, “I didn’t expect you to still be here.”

Hannibal nodded, taking the wood from her and tipping his head in the direction of Will’s room, where the man was currently sleeping like a dead man.

“I hadn’t intended to stay long,” he admitted, “but I doubt my car could survive the journey back in these conditions, and I would hate to leave Will alone in his current state regardless.”

Beverly hummed a sound of curious agreement.

“I told you he gets weird. Has he tried to sleep on the floor?”

Hannibal smiled. He was beginning to like Beverly, if only because she clearly cared for Will.

“Only once since I have arrived,” he confided, “but the fever returned just before he fell asleep, so he may well have moved to the floor since I left him to meet you.”

Beverly laughed softly and shook her head.

“I’ve got more firewood in the back, but I can get it in a minute. I want to check on him,” she said, “not that I don’t trust your judgment, Doctor. He was just pretty upset the last time I talked to him.”

Hannibal nodded.

“Not at all. I would think you negligent if you did not insist on seeing him immediately.”

Beverly smiled and they both made their way to Will’s bedroom.

Will was still fast asleep in the bed, his mouth slightly open as he drooled lightly on the pillow. His hair was sticking up in every direction, and his dark lashes fluttered on his cheeks as he dreamed.

The sight hit Hannibal with a sudden and intense desire. He nearly froze in the doorway, confused by his own emotions, but managed to make it to the fireplace without drawing Beverly's attention. He sat the wood down and stoked the flame as he examined his reaction.

Hannibal realized he wanted to kiss Will. He wanted to press his lips to Will's feverish forehead. He wanted to smooth his sweaty hair away from his face and look into those bright, intelligent eyes. He wanted to hold Will close and make him well again.

Hannibal forced himself to feed the fire and feign indifference as Beverly sat by Will's bed, in the chair Hannibal had taken up residence in since he arrived.

"Hey," Beverly said softly, as if at a funeral, but Will remained motionless aside from his slow and shallow breathing, "I guess you're really asleep. That's good. You need to rest. I hope Doctor Lecter has been taking good care of you. I think he has. When you wake up, we can talk about my work debacle."

Beverly sat there for another long moment before she took a deep breath and heaved herself up out of the chair.

"I'll go get the rest of the firewood," she said, and Hannibal stood to meet her.

"I will help you," he said, "and then perhaps I'll make some tea if you are amenable. Stave off the chill we are sure to get from the rain and prevent either of us from falling ill as well."

Beverly smiled, and her eyes sparkled brightly.

"That sounds great," she told him earnestly, "thank you."

They brought in the impressive haul of wood, and Hannibal brought a second chair into Will's bedroom so they could watch over him as they shared their tea.

Beverly did not seem overly worried about Will's condition, but she did look at him sympathetically every so often. Hannibal wondered about her and her relationship with Will, but mostly he wondered if she would tell him anything about the man himself.

"Will doesn't get sick often," Beverly said, breaking the silence, "which is a miracle with the way he used to take care of himself. Since meeting you he's been better. I know it's because you gave him a laundry list of things to do, but it never would have worked if he didn't like you from the start."

Hannibal was fascinated, listening intently as if Beverly was telling him the secret to saving a life. He knew it was a bit ridiculous, but he wanted to know everything about Will. Every detail, not matter how small, could not seem insignificant to him.

"I bet you don't realize how strange it is that Will warmed up to you so fast," Beverly continued, smiling fondly as she sipped her tea, "Will doesn't like anyone. He likes me, he's alright with Alana sometimes, and he likes *you*. It's an exclusive club, Doctor Lecter. I want you to be aware of that."

Hannibal felt as if she was giving him the talk, like a father to a boy wanting to date his daughter. It was amusing more than insulting, and in light of his recent revelation might be almost absurdly appropriate.

To know Hannibal had somehow, unknowingly passed a test to begin the process of friendship, that he'd been one of so few people ever deemed worthy of such a thing, did expand his ego quite noticeably, but Hannibal pushed that aside for the time being.

"He and I are much more alike than I had realized," Hannibal confessed, "he is the first person in many years I would call a friend."

Beverly huffed a laugh and nodded, as if that made perfect sense.

"You're doing more as his friend now than I am," she said, wincing a bit at her own words, "I mean, I'd have been here days ago if it weren't for work being so crazy."

Hannibal tipped his head curiously.

"Where do you work?" he asked.

"She catches bad guys," Will croaked, apparently awake now and trying to sit up.

Both Hannibal and Beverly moved to help, but Hannibal was quicker and beat her to it. Soon enough, Will was sitting up comfortably, though his gaze was glassy and red rimmed with fever. Hannibal made a note to give him medicine again very soon.

"You work in law enforcement?" Hannibal asked Beverly as he gave Will a cursory once over.

Beverly scoffed, but smiled.

"Only in the vaguest sense," she replied, "I'm in forensics. I never see any field action."

It was Will's turn to scoff, the gesture childish and exaggerated, convincing Hannibal he was on the verge of "weird" again.

"For the FBI," Will said, squinting at her as if suspicious, then turned and looked up at Hannibal with large and sincere eyes, "that's why I called her when I saw someone made that tableaux like from my book. I knew she'd know who to talk to about it."

Hannibal's mind caught on a bit of information, and he thought of what a small world this must be.

"You work with the FBI," he said, turning to Beverly again, but staying at Will's side as he spoke, "so you are helping to investigate the recent murder?"

Beverly shrugged, but nodded.

"Yeah. We already had the whole scene in the labs by the time Will found out about it. You heard?"

Hannibal smiled wanly.

“I am Will’s psychiatrist,” he reminded her, though it now felt like a partial lie, “I had planned to discuss it with him today at our session.”

If he had to talk about it with Will right now, Hannibal would be disappointed. He had hoped to have Will to himself for that conversation, but he would manage.

Beverly nodded again.

“Makes sense, but my boss isn’t very happy with how fast word got around about it. Especially those pictures. You’d think it’s being promoted as a movie or something.”

Hannibal glanced at Will, who didn’t seem to be listening anymore. He was reaching for the notebook on the bedside table, as if he meant to write.

Hannibal handed it to him along with the pen laying beside it, almost without thought. Will immediately began scribbling on the first blank page, in that peculiarly clever script he had that Hannibal could not decipher.

Even when he was sick, Will continued to write. It made Hannibal smile, though he wondered if it would reflect the feverish confusion Will seemed to be in.

“I agree. It had been rather sensationalized,” Hannibal said, “do you think his books will gain popularity for it?”

Beverly scoffed and waved her hand.

“Sales will probably spike, but anyone who was going to like it has probably read it already. He’s a big name in the horror scene. Anyone who buys it just because of the murder probably won’t like what they read. There’s going to be a lot of discussion about his books in the near future, at the very least. I imagine there Will be people advocating for removal from shelves.”

At that, Will looked up from his writing.

“If they can’t find them at the libraries, people who are looking to read it just for the murder are going to buy a copy instead. Online if they have to. If they take them from libraries right now, that’s about a one hundred percent increase in sales. They’d be doing me a favor.”

Beverly huffed, sounding tired and irritated by the entire thing.

“That’s also true,” she said, “whatever happens, all roads lead to money in Will’s pocket.”

Hannibal considered that, and stored it away to bring up when he had Will alone again. So far, he found conversation with Beverly to be enlightening.

“How is the investigation coming along?” he asked her, then paused as if in consideration, “unless you are prohibited from discussing it.”

Beverly waved him off and flopped back down in her seat. Hannibal gave Will one last once over before taking his seat as well.

“There’s one big difference between what Will wrote in his book and what we found,” she said, and Hannibal listened intently. He had been sure every detail had been exact. “Absolutely *nothing*.”

Hannibal frowned, confused for a moment before Beverly elaborated.

“In the book, the killer left fibers, and gravel, and *evidence* ,” she said, “but this guy didn’t leave anything behind. Unless he comes out of the woodworks and confesses to it for us, we’re never going to catch him. We couldn’t even prove it was him if he *did* confess, unless he knows too much about it. That’s where we’re at right now.”

Beverly seemed simultaneously distressed and impressed. She was upset because she wanted to do her job and catch the “bad guy”, but she couldn’t help but admire the care and skill which would have gone into such a feat. Hannibal guessed she had never seen a criminal leave a scene quite like his.

Hannibal’s ego was being fed quite well today.

“What does the FBI do in such a case?” he asked.

Beverly sighed.

“Depends on what Jack thinks will work,” she said, and glanced at Will, who seemed to be dozing in the middle of writing, “I’m worried he’s going to do something to Will. In his eyes, Will’s the real cause of all this.”

Hannibal pressed his lips together in a frown. Whoever Jack was, he would have to be careful. Hannibal didn’t intend for Will to be hurt by his foolishness. Hannibal would show Jack that messing with Will would get him nothing but trouble.

“I hope he does not,” Hannibal said, “Will has enough monsters in his head as it is, and adding more in the form of the FBI would only be detrimental to everyone involved.”

Beverly smiled sadly and nodded.

“Yeah. I can’t say that to Jack, though, because I’d get kicked off the case. Conflict of interest and all that.”

Hannibal considered that for a moment, and thought he may be visited by someone from the FBI in the near future. He was, after all, Will’s psychiatrist, and may be able to offer insight into the mind of their one and only suspect.

19

Hannibal's soup was so good Will was sure he'd be addicted by the time he was well again. And that moment seemed to be looming closer with every moment. Hannibal was taking very good care of him, and Will almost dreaded the moment he would leave.

"Beverly go back to the real world?" Will asked in between spoonfuls of the ambrosia.

Hannibal was watching Will eat with barely concealed amusement, and Will thought he must have narcissistic tendencies. He was almost smug about Will enjoying his food so much. That was it.

"Yes. She left us with enough firewood to see us through to the end of the universe, and returned to her incredibly important career of hunting criminals," Hannibal replied, sounding far more teasing and humorous than Will had ever thought the man could be, "She offered to drive me, as my car is still marooned out here with us, but I elected to stay and see you to health again."

Will frowned.

"You've been here almost an entire day now," he said, "you have obligations, and you need to sleep, and there's no reason for you to be here. I've taken care of myself all my life. I can do it again for a few days."

Hannibal's brow creased slightly, and he seemed concerned.

"No man is meant to bear all of life on his own, Will," Hannibal said, and his voice was low, almost as if he hoped Will wouldn't be able to hear him, "All I ask is that you let me lighten your load."

Will didn't know how to respond to that, so he didn't. He finished his soup in silence, then picked up his notebook when Hannibal took the bowl from him. Hannibal's eyes flicked to the open pages as Will read over what he had written earlier. Will wanted to see what exactly he'd come up with.

"Anything good?" Hannibal asked, as if he knew Will had been dubious of that himself.

Will scanned over the pages and grimaced, coming very near to tearing the pages out and offering them as tinder for the fire. He never destroyed any of his own writing, using it as either inspiration or motivation to do better in the future. But this drove him near.

"Absolutely not," Will replied, turning to a fresh page just to get that garbage out of his sight, "for some reason, I thought it would be a good idea to write a period romance with my household items as the main cast. Madame Tissue box was the leading lady. I can't fathom why on earth I'd bother to write that down."

Hannibal smiled, and Will thought he must be suppressing laughter. It intrigued him, because he wanted to know why Hannibal was holding back, and he really wanted to hear Hannibal laugh freely. He didn't even know why he wanted it, but he did.

"Perhaps it could be reflective of your current emotional state," Hannibal said, an amused sparkle in his eye as he left the room to take the dish to the kitchen. Will was left to wonder what he meant by that.

Will picked up his phone and saw that Beverly had sent him a few texts after leaving. The first was an apology for not waiting until he woke up to say goodbye, and then one insisting he let her know if he needed anything else. The last was sent nearly an hour after the others, and Will thought it must have been an afterthought. Something she almost didn't send.

-I think Doctor Lecter really likes you ;)-

Will felt his face heat with a blush and he quickly put his phone away when Hannibal walked back in.

The man looked at Will appraisingly from the doorway, as if rating his level of illness. Will wondered if he had been doing that every time he looked at Will since arriving, gauging his ability to hold an intelligent conversation. That thought made Will's blush deepen because he knew there had been times when he hadn't been capable of being intelligent.

"You are flushed," Hannibal noted, coming over to the bed, concern on his features now, "do you feel feverish?"

Will didn't have a chance to respond before Hannibal's hands were on his face, cupping his jaw in a touch that was far too intimate for him to fully comprehend. Hannibal studied him, moving his hands to feel his forehead and cheeks.

"You feel slightly warm, but not concerningly so," Hannibal noted, nodding to himself as he spoke. He must have been a good doctor. Will wondered why he'd stopped.

Hannibal stared at Will for a moment longer, and Will didn't know what to say. Hannibal's cool hands felt so good against his skin, and the other man's nearness was intoxicating. Will wanted him to stay there forever, just staring at him and holding his face and caring for him.

Will really should do something to stop himself from having these thoughts about his psychiatrist/friend(?), but he didn't have the energy at the moment, or a strong enough desire.

"If you are feeling up to it, it would aid your recovery to bathe," Hannibal said, which did nothing to help Will's blush, "A change of clothes, and perhaps a change of bedding would also serve, if you are amenable."

Will just nodded, pulling the covers back so he could get up. He couldn't deny he felt a bit suffocated by the same clothes and quilts he'd been wrapped in for days. And his hair felt greasy from all the sweat when the fever had broken in a cycle. He really did need to shower.

Will padded over to his dresser and pulled out a drawer, gathering a new set of clothes for himself. He turned around and saw Hannibal quickly avert his gaze, only then realizing he was dressed in just his boxers and a T-shirt. Will was sure that if it was possible to get a fever from embarrassment alone he would have one by now.

Instead of apologizing or saying anything that would probably only further embarrass him, Will just hurried to the bathroom. He shut and locked the door behind him, closing himself in with his thoughts.

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Hannibal found the linen closet fairly easily and stripped the bed once he heard the water turn on. He worked quickly and efficiently, redressing and making the bed so it looked presentable. He tried not to think about Will being in the shower, but it was a losing battle. It was also a battle he had never had to fight before, which made it all strange to him.

When the bed was made, the fire freshly fed, Hannibal went about making something for Will to eat. He was feeling tired, now, having not slept for nearly twenty four hours, but he wouldn't let himself rest until Will had eaten again. It was necessary he continue to eat, to fuel his recovery.

Hannibal was enjoying this time with Will, much more than he had expected to. He had planned to ingratiate himself into Will's life by taking care of him and then never relinquishing the intimacy he established. He had not counted on his own emotions reacting in this way.

Hannibal set the table, deciding Will was improving quickly enough he could benefit from a bit of activity. Hannibal wanted to discuss the poisonous man, and he wanted Will to be coherent for it.

Will emerged in a pair of flannel pajama pants and a fresh T-shirt. His hair was in damp curls around his face, and he very nearly looked well again. It made Hannibal's smile all the more warm.

"Are you feeling well enough to eat out here?" Hannibal asked, and Will's eyes swept over the table, wide and observant.

"I think so," Will answered with a short nod, "but I don't know how long it will last."

Hannibal's smiled grew and he pulled out a chair for Will.

"I shall carry you back to your bed if need be," he said pleasantly as Will sat.

Will's face flushed a bit, and Hannibal wondered if it was due to his words or the returning fever. He thought it most likely the latter, and wouldn't dare hope for the former. The sight made him smile again regardless.

"You really don't have to be here," Will told him, his head bowed towards his plate, "You've already done more than enough. You need rest, too, and you have obligations to keep."

Hannibal hummed in agreement.

“Would you believe me if I say I want to be here?” he asked, and Will looked up at him doubtfully, “in my opinion, none of my obligations outweighs taking care of you.”

Will stared at Hannibal for a long moment, as if deciding whether or not Hannibal was sincere. After some time, he evidently decided it would be unproductive to argue, and turned back to begin eating his food.

“You have something you want to talk to me about,” Will said after a few bites and a sip of the tea Hannibal had set out for him.

Hannibal allowed his foot to shift next to his bag on the floor and he forced his eyes down to his own plate.

“Nothing that cannot wait until our next session, when you are well,” he said simply.

Hannibal saw Will notice his reaction and it gave him a bit of a thrill to know he had Will’s attention all to himself. Will frowned slightly and took another long pause to consider it. Hannibal hoped Will would react as he had planned, but he knew Will was not so easy to predict.

“You’re not my psychiatrist anymore, Doctor Lecter, “Will said, and Hannibal tipped his head, “we’re friends. They aren’t sessions. They’re just conversations. So let’s hear it.”

Hannibal sighed softly, but he was delighted with Will for his response. He pulled the printed article from his bag and set it on the table facing Will.

“I’d like to hear your thoughts on this,” he said.

Hannibal saw Will’s pupils dilate, nearly eclipsing the color. A thrill ran down his spine at the sight, and he wet his lips in anticipation.

Will reached out and picked up the top paper. The one with the picture.

“Someone killed this man and displayed him in exactly the way I wrote it in my novel,” Will said softly, “I thought I had to be dreaming when I first saw it, because it’s exactly what I saw in my head every time I thought of it.”

Hannibal was pleased with that. He had done his best to show Will’s hand in the work through his own, and was glad Will thought he had done well.

“It’s my favorite one,” Will continued, color once again rising to his cheeks as he spoke, “I always thought that was the best tableau from all my books. It’s my favorite book, and my favorite scene. I would have recognized it anywhere.”

Hannibal was in awe of the man. He hadn’t known it was Will’s favorite kill as well, but he had hoped. He had always admired it more than the others, but it was validating to hear the creator agreed with him.

“You have quite the admirer,” Hannibal said.

Will looked up at him, his eyes still dark with pleasure. His gaze was clear of fever, but distant. As if he had gone somewhere else entirely.

“Yes. I do. And for better or for worse, I’d like to meet them.”

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Hannibal's heart stuttered in his chest and he fought down the urge to do something entirely rash. Now was not the time for mistakes.

"What would you hope to gain from meeting such an individual?" He asked, careful to keep his tone even and his expression mild, "Surely they are quite dangerous and a violent criminal."

Will nodded, taking a bite of food with the picture held delicately in his other hand.

"They are," he agreed, "I'd just like to talk to them. Ask why they chose me, why this specific scene, and what they think of my work. I'd like to understand the world the way they see it. I don't think I'm in any danger from them."

Hannibal could not have imagined a better course for the conversation to follow. Will wasn't frightened by him, and wanted to know him. That was more than he could have asked for.

"Why not?" Hannibal questioned, "they clearly have a fixation on you, and have no qualms to being violent. That is a dangerous combination. Anyone else would be asking for police protection."

Will scrunched his nose in a way that was almost childish, but Hannibal found charming. He thought Will Graham could end up being the exception to many things.

"I don't want to depend on other people for my safety," Will said, "Jack Crawford and I aren't exactly on the best of terms either. But I can tell this killer has no interest in hurting me. At least not yet. This was just to get my attention. Now that they have it, I'm curious what they will do."

Hannibal suppressed a smile.

"How will they know they have your attention?" he asked, "you have not made a public statement regarding the murder."

Will smiled, apparently feeling no need to hide his feelings for the moment.

"How could I not notice them?" he replied, enough explanation entirely.

Hannibal was inclined to agree. His gesture had not been at all subtle in his bid for Will's attention, and he had known the man would not need anything further in order to look his way.

"Maybe when they catch him, they'll let me talk to him."

Hannibal tipped his head curiously. He was sure the FBI would do no such thing, especially considering what he had heard about this Jack Crawford.

“You are certain they will catch him,” he noted aloud, interested in what Will was thinking.

Will shrugged.

“Yeah. They’re good at what they do. If no one else, I have faith in Beverly. I’m sure they’ll catch him. It’s just a matter of when,” Will answered.

Hannibal hummed in reply. It was interesting to see Will put so much blind trust into a group of people he didn’t know, and who had already caused him distress. Hannibal briefly entertained the idea of telling Will what Beverly had told him regarding the likelihood of them catching the killer. He decided against it, planning to let Will discover the truth as time allowed.

“Now the killer has your attention,” Hannibal said, pouring more tea for Will, “what do you expect they will do? Will they fade back into obscurity?”

Will frowned and set down the picture back on the stack of other papers. He took a few more bites as he mulled it over, a crease forming between his brows.

“No,” He said at last, sounding sure and decided, “they won’t stop now, especially because they have my attention. They mean to show me something, and they won’t stop until he’s sure I understand. It’s a performance, and I’m the target audience.”

Hannibal was pleased. Will was falling into perfect and easy understanding, missing nothing. He would be so beautiful when he fully learned what Hannibal was doing for him and learned his own stunning potential. Will Graham was an entity unto himself, and Hannibal was aching to know him.

“How does it make you feel, to have a killer sending you this message?” he asked.

Will huffed.

“Just when I’d almost forgotten you’re a psychiatrist,” he chided, then paused to think before he continued, “mostly just shocked at first. Then, when I had the chance to think it over, I was frightened. But the thrill I felt mixed with the fear, and it was amazing. Fear and excitement pair well together, don’t you think?”

Hannibal wet his lips and nodded.

“I do,” he agreed, and Will continued.

“Now, I’m flattered. Whoever did this,” he gestured to the picture, “is clearly intelligent and talented. It’s an honor to have caught their eye at all, not to mention inspire them in any way. It’s awful to think that way, isn’t it? I’ll never say this to Jack.”

Hannibal felt as if his heart was about to burst from his chest. He wondered if Will would be able to hear it from across the table. It seemed louder than ocean waves in Hannibal’s ears. Lucky or not for him, Hannibal could tell Will was beginning to run down a bit. Even this little bit of activity had worn him out, and he was ready to lay down again.

Hannibal was pleased with the amount of food Will had eaten, and the length of his coherence. He thought the tail end of this period might be responsible for the frank honesty of Will's last bit of confession. He almost felt bad for taking advantage of this state Will was in, and knew he couldn't be too free in his actions, because Will seemed to remember at least most of what he said and did in these moments.

"I don't blame you," Hannibal said calmly, trying not to let his own excitement show, "The FBI have a way of twisting ones words to best suit their needs, in my experience. Most people do when they have an agenda. That being said, I do not think you are guilty of anything. It's entirely understandable to be pleased to be acknowledged."

Will huffed a soft laugh and shook his head.

"I think I'm starting to get fuzzy around the edges again, Doctor Lecter," he said, and Hannibal could hear the effort it took for him to keep his voice from showing his exhaustion, "Maybe we should put a hold on this discussion of morality for a time when I'm capable of rational thought."

Hannibal smiled and nodded.

"That is probably wise," he agreed, "Should I help you back to bed?"

Will nodded wearily, moving to stand up. Hannibal was at his side in an instant, decidedly not analyzing his own responses to the man's needs, helping him to stand and walk back to the bedroom.

The room felt fresh, and smelled it. Will could feel the difference the moment Hannibal helped him over the threshold. The bed was clean and made up to the standard of a hotel, all the used tissues had been removed, and it had been aired out a bit so the stuffy and fever scented air was gone.

Will didn't know how a man like Hannibal Lecter could exist outside of a book. It didn't make any sense.

"Thank you," Will managed as Hannibal helped him into the bed, his voice was a whisper so it wouldn't scratch at his throat as much. He could feel the fever behind his eyes again, but he could tell it wasn't as intense now as it had been every time before.

"My pleasure," Hannibal said, arranging the blankets around Will before taking his seat once more at the bedside.

Will knew Hannibal needed to sleep. He just didn't know how to make the man agree to do it.

"You can sleep on the couch," Will said, "or even in my armchair out by the window. You need sleep, and if you won't go home to do it you might as well make yourself comfortable."

Hannibal smiled wanly, almost in distaste at the idea. Will wondered what motivated such an expression.

"I wouldn't want to be so far away," Hannibal confessed, "in case you need anything."

Will huffed, laying on his back and putting the back of his forearm over his forehead. The skin of his arm was cooler than his face, and it offered a bit more clarity to his thoughts.

"We could get me a bell to ring for you, but that would feel awfully condescending, wouldn't it?" he said with a wry smile.

Hannibal chuckled softly.

"Indeed. You needn't worry for me, Will. Focus only on your recovery."

Will wanted to argue, but knew it wouldn't do any good.

"Alright. Just promise you won't get sick because of me. I'd feel terrible."

Hannibal nodded gently, a warm smile on his face.

"I will do my utmost to do as you ask," he said, "now rest."

Will stared at Hannibal. His dark eyes glowed warmly in the light of the fire, more comforting than Will would ever admit to anyone. He didn't want Hannibal to leave, honestly, and enjoyed his presence in his home. Despite their differences, Hannibal seemed to fit in among Will's things. The rustic home Will occupied didn't clash with the image Hannibal presented. Instead, he looked almost perfectly at ease among the bursting shelves of books and various writing implements. Will liked it.

As Will let his eyes close, he caught one last glimpse of Hannibal's smile, and thought the man was ridiculously handsome. It was entirely unfair, especially since the man was so far from reach.

Will felt himself falling asleep, even as his thoughts continued to flow sluggishly.

He had said some strange things about the killer. He was sure of that. But Lecter hadn't seemed concerned at all. He hadn't seem put off or worried. Will didn't understand him, but he wanted to. He wanted to peel back the man's skin and see what went on in his ribcage, see the gears and cogs at work making the man be the way he was. He wondered if the man would be unique in the geography of his internal making the same way his personality was.

And Will fell asleep.

21

When Will fell asleep, Hannibal sighed heavily. He was honestly exhausted. He hadn't let himself rest since coming to Will's home and beginning to help him. He had been too concerned with making Will well again.

Will's breathing wasn't as shaky and he seemed more at ease this time than he had before when he had slept. Hannibal was sure Will was very nearly well again. It would not be much longer before he could return to his usual activities.

The rain stopped, and Hannibal looked to the window. Water dripped from the eves of the house, creating a natural symphony of sound that soothed Hannibal's mind.

He understood why Will lived here. It was far away from the bustle of the city, where the lights and sounds of the throngs. He could look out the window and know he was entirely safe and alone. Nothing could touch him here. This was the world he had created for himself. It was secluded and warm, where it seemed the most valuable things were words. Hannibal found that to be poetic and incredibly apt for the man.

Will was a beautiful mind, and the world he had created for himself was beautiful as well.

Will made a soft sound in his sleep, and Hannibal wondered if he was dreaming. He didn't seem frightened, so Hannibal was pleased. He stood and brushed the newly cleaned locks of hair back from Will's face. The man's skin was slightly warmer than it should be, but not worryingly so. Hannibal gave into the urge and pressed a kiss to Will's forehead, breathing in deeply and filling his lungs with Will.

Under the illness and soap from his shower, Will smelled like paper, ink, and fresh growth like a forest underbrush. Hannibal found that so completely appropriate for the man.

Hannibal pulled away, sighing softly. He resumed his seat by the bed, watching the slow rise and fall of Will's chest. He could hear Will's breathing, even under the sounds of the world slowly coming to rest after days of anxious activity. The sounds mingled together in the air with the soft crackling of the fire, and Hannibal closed his eyes. In its own way, this symphony was as beautiful as any orchestra he had heard. He savored it.

Hannibal didn't realize he was falling asleep until he was past the point of no return, when he found himself walking through the halls of his mind.

Will woke up, and once again found himself face to face with a sight he decided must be the strangest possible.

His head was clear, free of fever, and Hannibal Lecter was asleep in the chair by his bed.

His hair fell in a soft fringe over his brow, his head bowed forward with his chin on his chest. His breaths came slow and deep, different from most people when they were asleep, but not to the point of being strange. Mostly, what made this sight strange to Will was just how relaxed the man looked. Hannibal Lecter was not relaxed, generally. He gave the appearance of being at ease with himself, wearing his three piece suits and Italian leather shoes, speaking calmly and allowing silences to linger to encourage others to fill it. He inspired relaxation in the people around him, because he was so stable and unbothered, but he was never truly relaxed.

Here, now, in Will's home. Sitting beside Will's bed. Lecter was truly relaxed in sleep.

It felt indecent, seeing Lecter that way. No one ever saw him in this state, so vulnerable. Will felt that was a concrete fact, though it hadn't been confirmed. Lecter hadn't given him any reason to believe he was lonely, that he didn't have a cornucopia of friends hanging on his every word and filling every moment of his free time.

But, it was true. Wasn't it?

If Hannibal had so many people he spent time around, enjoyed being with and genuinely liked, he wouldn't have come here in the first place. He wouldn't have insisted on becoming friendly with Will. He wouldn't have stayed when Beverly offered to drive him back to town.

All at once, Will started to see Hannibal as lonely. He didn't pity the man for it, didn't think Hannibal would appreciate it. In fact, he was sure it would be an insult to the man. Will didn't see him as lonely in the way he saw children ostracized on the playground as lonely. Hannibal was lonely by nature, because he hadn't found anyone he truly hoped to connect with.

Will felt a tugging in his chest, a pull to the man he didn't understand. He had felt this before, but never towards a person. This was what he felt when an idea took hold of him and he was about to write his next novel. When the idea was good enough to warrant complete dedication. It was what he felt when the next several months of his life would be dedicated to completing something obsessively.

Will didn't move, didn't want to wake Hannibal up. He didn't know if the man would wake from something as quiet as the rustling of the blankets, but he didn't want to risk it. He knew Hannibal had been exhausted, and only allowed himself to fall asleep when Will was already dead to the world. If Will hadn't woken up first, he would never have seen the man in such a vulnerable state. It was strangely intimate and Will didn't want it to end.

Hannibal made a soft sound in his sleep, his breath puffing his hair away from his face a bit. Will wondered if he was dreaming, and what a man like Hannibal dreamt of.

Will closed his eyes, and allowed his mind to drift. He didn't do this often outside of writing, because it felt invasive, but Hannibal had given him indications that he wanted to be understood. Wanted Will to know him.

Will replayed every moment they had been in the same room, images and details flashing through his mind like a rapid slideshow. As they went, connections formed between them and settled in Will's mind. He gathered them like thistles, sharp and colorful and potentially damaging.

A memory resurfaced. One Will hadn't remembered until that moment, and he had to fight back a gasp to avoid waking Hannibal. His eyes flew open and landed on the sleeping man again, and he remembered.

"What am I, Will?"

"You're dangerous."

Will tried to remember why he had said that. He racked his mind for a reason to call Hannibal dangerous. He ran through everything he had learned about the man since first meeting him. Everything he had seen and heard.

Hannibal could be dangerous because Will told him things, or because he understood too much. He might be dangerous because Will trusted him too much and too fast.

These things were possible, and rang true, but none of them fit what Will had said to the man before slipping into oblivion. He had meant it much more literally, he thought. A physical threat, perhaps as well as this metaphorical one.

Why had he said it? What had he seen, in that fever-addled state?

When Hannibal woke, it wasn't all at once like waking so often was. He slowly began to stir, his lashes fluttering lightly against his sharp cheekbones, his breathing changed slightly, and his fingers twitched by his leg. Will watched, fascinated, eyes wide with curiosity.

When Hannibal opened his eyes, Will remembered what he was doing and tore his own gaze down. He could have pretended to still be asleep if he had thought about it sooner, but it was too late.

"Will," Hannibal said, then cleared his throat. His voice was slightly rough from sleep, and it made Will feel a bit warm in his chest. "I apologize. I hadn't meant to sleep. Is there anything you need?"

Will smiled and huffed a laugh, shaking his head.

"No," he said, and he realized his throat was feeling better than it had in days, "You're fine. I'm glad you got some rest. I could see you were getting tired. How are you feeling?"

Hannibal smiled, amused.

"I should be asking you," he said, "you are the one who is ill."

Will rolled his eyes and sat up in the bed, feeling strong enough to do it by himself this time.

"I asked you first," he said, feeling juvenile but not caring.

Hannibal huffed his own laugh this time and adjusted himself in the chair, smoothing out his clothes so he looked as impeccable as ever.

“I am feeling well,” Hannibal said calmly, “rested, at least. I confess to having a bit of a sore neck, by nature of my sleeping position. Incidentally.”

Will smiled and nodded.

“Alright. Well, since you’re so accommodating, I’m feeling a lot better today. That’s all thanks to you, of course. I don’t know if I would have pegged you as the housekeeping type.”

Hannibal tipped his head, his smile still in place and warm.

“What would you think of me as, if not the housekeeping type?” he asked.

Will thought about that, remembering that he had told the man he was dangerous not all that long ago. He wondered if Hannibal knew he had forgotten, and didn’t expect him to remember, or if he thought Will remembered and simply wasn’t bringing it up to be polite.

“The type who goes to operas and art galleries,” Will said, “you enjoy the finest things in life, which usually lends to living the kind of life where you pay someone to keep house. People like that aren’t usually so… nurturing.”

Will didn’t know how else to phrase it, but he wasn’t sure he had chosen the right words. It didn’t quite seem to fit the man, even in this situation where it was technically appropriate. The denotation was correct, but the connotation wasn’t.

Hannibal hummed thoughtfully, looking over to the fire, which had burned down to nearly embers while they had slept.

“People *like that* don’t often endure hardships,” Hannibal said, “so their empathy towards others is stunted. They simply never learn what it is to care for another person.”

Will felt his eyes grow wide as he realized something else about the man. It slotted perfectly into the growing picture he had been painting, and shifted the image.

“You had a younger sibling,” Will said, almost to himself it was so quiet, “but they died. You cared for them, and lost them. That was your hardship.”

Hannibal sighed softly, just a soft breath through his nose.

“Your perception is a sharp instrument, Will,” he said softly, “I imagine it makes others quite uncomfortable.”

Will closed his eyes, berating himself for saying what he had. He wanted Hannibal to like him, and here he was, digging up traumatic childhood events. That was not the way to go about things.

“Yeah,” he said apologetically, “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to pry. I’m not all that practiced holding my tongue these days.”

Hannibal smiled again, sadly, and turned back to Will.

“No need to be sorry, Will,” he said, “if you ever wish to say something, I would like to hear it. No matter how unsavory or impolite. I prefer honesty between friends.”

Will felt that strike him deeply. He had inferred before that Hannibal disliked rudeness, and to hear him say Will was allowed it because they were friends was stunningly intimate. He wasn’t sure how Hannibal felt about what he had just said, but Will felt it was significant.

“I called you dangerous,” Will said, watching for Hannibal’s reaction.

Hannibal met Will’s eyes, interested.

“Yes,” he agreed, sitting back comfortably in his chair, “you did.”

Will frowned. He wasn’t sure what say now that he had brought it up. He hadn’t given it enough thought.

“I’m sorry if that upset you,” he said, “I can’t quite remember why I said it.”

Hannibal smiled.

“It did not upset me at all, Will,” he said, “I was curious as to your reasoning, but not insulted. It serves well to be at least marginally dangerous in this world.”

Will huffed a laugh and nodded again. He was relieved Hannibal wasn’t upset with him, but he still didn’t know why he felt the man was dangerous. He might remember later on.

“Yeah. I guess so.”

They allowed a comfortable silence to grow between them, and Will realized just how quiet it was.

“The rain stopped,” he said, looking to the window.

Hannibal nodded, standing up and going to feed the fire some more.

“Yes. If it does not return, the road conditions should be good enough for me to leave by noon.”

Will startled a bit at that, having forgotten the man would have to leave. He had fit into Will’s life so well he had forgotten he didn’t belong there. The idea he had to go home, leaving Will once again to himself, stung him like nettles. He didn’t want Hannibal to leave, but there was nothing he could do to make him stay.

“That’s good,” Will said, and hoped Hannibal wouldn’t be able to hear the bitterness in his voice.

22

Will was looking nearly well again, and Hannibal was pleased. While he would be sad to go, he was satisfied he had helped Will recover.

Even more than Will being nearly well, Hannibal was pleased he seemed capable of intelligent conversation for the time being.

They sat in mutual silence for a few minutes. It looked like Will was trying to work up to saying something, but he was having difficulty putting it into words.

Eventually, Hannibal stood and asked if Will would like some soup. Will agreed, and Hannibal went to prepare some. He had been pleasantly surprised by how well stocked Will's kitchen had been, and recalled what he knew about Will's eating habits based on what he had confessed and Beverly had told Hannibal when she had come. He thought it was possible Will had stocked his kitchen with Hannibal in mind, and the idea caused a warm flutter in Hannibal's chest.

When the soup was nearly done, Will emerged from the bedroom. He was looking more well with every moment, color in his cheeks and a clarity to his gaze that made Hannibal smiled with satisfaction. Will sat at the table and watched as Hannibal finished the soup and poured some into a bowl.

It was a simple chicken soup because, while Will had bought groceries, he hadn't purchased the ingredients required for anything to Hannibal's usual standard.

"Tell me, Will," Hannibal said, setting the bowl down in front of the man, "what was your first experience with death?"

Will raised an eyebrow at Hannibal curiously, not appearing offended or upset at all.

"That's an interesting topic for table conversation," Will said, stirring his soup with the spoon lazily, "why do you ask?"

Hannibal, having expected just such a question, had a response prepared. While it was not entirely the truth, it would make sense and hopefully not rouse Will's suspicions.

"Your dreams," he replied, sitting down with his own bowl and meeting Will's gaze with frank curiosity, "they could very well have been caused by some unresolved trauma having to do with the concept of death. It may seem an incredibly simple solution, perhaps even pedestrian, and I think it is highly likely you have already considered it yourself. I am merely curious."

Will considered that for a long moment, beginning to eat his soup with his head down and his eyes fixed on the bowl. Hannibal had begun to wonder if he had made Will uncomfortable and if he would refuse to answer, when Will spoke.

“A dog,” he said, “rabies. It came across me when I was out in the trees behind the house. I was nine years old, and I knew I needed to get away from it, but I wouldn’t be able to outrun it. I climbed a tree. The dog didn’t get bored of me, though. An hour later, my dad came looking. He had his shotgun and the dog didn’t have a chance to so much as blink.”

Hannibal listened. Will’s storytelling was slightly disjointed, and lacked flowery vocabulary. He wasn’t very descriptive, and it was in stark contrast to his writing style. It was fascinating, and Hannibal wondered what other fans of Will would give to have this chance to compare. Hannibal was content to hoard this time to himself, though.

“When I got down from the tree, I didn’t have a choice but to step in the blood,” Will continued distantly, as if he was no longer entirely there with Hannibal, “My sneakers were stained for weeks. I washed them off in rainwater, got soaked to the bone on purpose just to wash off the blood.”

Will stopped, and that seemed to be the end of the story. He just ate his soup in contemplative silence. Hannibal watched him, entranced by the way Will could contain multitudes in this way. When he had spoken of death before now, he had seemed largely unbothered or interested, fascinated by the macabre when it was a human being shaped into it. Now, speaking of that rabid dog from his youth, Will seemed mournful.

“What do you think of, when you remember this?” Hannibal asked, leaning forward slightly in his chair.

Will ate some more soup and pressed his lips together. Hannibal thought it was only a matter of time before he asked a question Will would not answer. He was curious to find that boundary, if only so he could then stretch it.

“I think about God,” he said at last, “and about cruelty.”

Hannibal tipped his head, silently bidding Will to continue.

“God, if there is such a thing, must view death in a way similar to me. There is so much of it. Death isn’t something to be feared or hidden. It has its own beauty and justice. Not only that, but death supports all life, so it should be revered rather than hushed up. Death isn’t just a necessary evil.”

Here was that brilliant mind. Hannibal saw Will’s skill with words through how he was speaking now, as well as the beautiful imagination that had created and destroyed worlds as he put them on a page. This was the Will Graham Hannibal had set out to know, and the one he had first admired. Hannibal could not have asked for a better conversational companion, and wouldn’t have wanted one regardless.

Will blinked at his soup before slowly raising his eyes and peering at Hannibal through his dark lashes. His gaze was curious, and Hannibal thought he must be watching to see how Hannibal was reaching to his bold philosophies about death.

Hannibal carefully schooled his expression, not keen to give everything away so soon in the game.

“There are cultures that agree with that,” Hannibal said with a polite nod, “though western culture here has much stigma around the idea of death and any potential after. Even those who believe the dead simply pass on from this world to the next mourn their passing. Very little thought is given to the potential cause for celebration.”

Will nodded, seemingly no longer anxious what Hannibal might think or say in response to his thoughts. His eyes were shining with excitement, and Hannibal believed he did not have the opportunity to speak about these things nearly enough.

“Exactly,” Will said, “in an effort to avoid the pain of losing someone, we as a society have made ourselves more vulnerable to it. Parents tell their kids they won’t die, or that their friend or relative will recover, when they don’t know. Then, not only are the kids hurt by the eventual loss, they feel betrayed by the adult who lied about mortality. I’ve seen grown people deny the potential that someone they know could die. Sheltered their entire lives from the truth about life, they can’t accept the eventuality of death.”

Hannibal nodded, not having to lie about agreeing with Will about this. He had not yet found a subject he felt the need to lie to Will about. He hadn’t even lied about whether or not he had read Will’s books. Will had never asked, and Hannibal hadn’t offered a lie. He had been careful, and whether or not Will knew he had read the books hadn’t seemed to make much of a difference.

“Do you feel the things you write help to process the realities of death?” Hannibal asked, “for either you or your readers?”

Will put down his spoon and stared at the table between them. His gaze was distant again, but not fevered. He was only deep in thought, not lost.

“No,” Will said at length, “my writing has very little therapeutic value, in my opinion. For anyone. If anything, I take advantage of the societal aversion to the subject of death. I don’t use it solely for shock value, though I’ve been guilty of doing so in the past. For the most part, I treat the stories like a frog in a pot of water. It sits, and doesn’t realize I’ve turned up the heat until there’s no going back.”

Hannibal smiled. He thought the metaphor oddly apt. The beginnings of the stories were not as horrific as the ends, and by the time anyone reached that point they had become invested in the story and the characters. Slow boiling his audience was somewhat macabre, but essentially the truth.

Will looked up at Hannibal and his gaze once again cleared. He was watching Hannibal, the way he had that first day in the office. Like there was something he was trying to remember, or look at through the dark.

“You know, this killer they’re chasing,” Will said, changing the subject, “I think they must know something about me most people don’t, but I can’t figure out how. Icarus Sky was nowhere near my most popular novel. It never landed in top five lists, and rarely made it into top ten. It’s my favorite, but not the people’s.”

Hannibal listened, having already known very well where the book had been ranked. He hadn't cared about that when choosing his source material for the latest creation. He had enjoyed the book, and especially that scene.

"I don't care about that," Will continued, "never did. I don't really write for them. I write for me. The thing is, though, that most people didn't like that book, and it was just because I wrote it too clever. I've read some articles where scholarly types decided to analyze the entire novel, or bits of it. The intellects seem to like it more than the masses, which I suppose is some sort of compliment to my writing. It's not usually their favorite, either, but they rank it considerably higher."

Hannibal was fascinated. Will rarely engaged with his fanbase, which gave the impression that he didn't pay attention. But now it was clear he paid very close attention to what was said concerning his books. Hannibal thought it likely Will knew every word that had been said about his work by heart. He had perfect recall, after all.

"Which leads me to think the killer has to be incredibly intelligent," Will concluded, "if that wasn't already evident by their ability to avoid leaving evidence at the scene."

Hannibal tipped his head.

"How do you know they left no evidence?" he asked.

Will smiled.

"Beverly's been frustrated by it, and she's texted me a few times to vent. If they had something, her job would be a lot easier. I guess she isn't supposed to talk to me about a case, but she's my best friend."

Hannibal nodded. It made sense that Beverly would have talked about the case with Will, as she had felt comfortable enough to talk with Hannibal about it, and he was relatively a stranger to her.

"So, the killer is highly intelligent, and they know something about you others don't," Hannibal surmised and Will nodded,

"I think so, at least," he agreed, "but I know folks like Jack aren't going to take my word for it. I'm in a slightly sticky situation there. He's going to want to talk to me again, maybe even before the next body shows up. I don't know how happy he's going to be if I tell him what I think, but I can guess."

Hannibal considered that. This Jack Crawford character had not earned himself any favors in Hannibal's eyes, but he could be useful. There must be opposition in all things, after all, and Jack was making a fairly good contrast to Hannibal himself. If the man continued to drive Will away like this, he would be pushing him closer to Hannibal. It might be a very good thing for Hannibal that Agent Crawford was rude.

"I'll have to talk to Catherine about what I should say. I have a feeling she'd like me to glue my mouth shut rather than talk to anyone else about this entire thing," Will said, smiling

wanly.

Hannibal tipped his head.

“Can I assume Catherine is your legal counsel?” he asked.

Will nodded, taking his spoon up again and continuing to eat the remainder of his soup.

“Bev set me up with a lawyer the moment she knew the scene had come from my book,” Will said, “because that’s not exactly the kind of situation you want to be in, as a writer.”

Hannibal nodded. He made a mental note to repay Beverly in some way, because she had looked after Will’s interests before the FBI’s. She would be very valuable if Hannibal could make her see him as a friend.

If Hannibal was right, the Catherine Will spoke of was Catherine Meadows, which was good. Hannibal considered her to be good at her job, and didn’t care too much if someone was rude. Will could be rude sometimes, and Hannibal believed he would be more so when dealing with someone as abrasive and pushy as he believed Jack Crawford to be.

“I can imagine that would be legally uncomfortable,” Hannibal agreed, and Will huffed a laugh, “I’m pleased to hear you are not facing it alone.”

Will nodded.

“Yeah. I owe Bev about a hundred meals for that alone,” he said, “she’s saved my hide too many times to count.”

Hannibal smiled.

Beverly would definitely be an asset to him, as long as he could ensure she was on his side. He didn’t think that would be too difficult. She had seemed to like him well enough from their first meeting.

23

Hannibal had left at two in the afternoon, and the house felt empty.

Will had never had a problem with that. He had never felt the need to fill his life with other people. The people he created in his head kept him company all day, and he found them more interesting than most breathing people. At night, shadows crept through the corners of his mind and left him feeling in constant company.

But Hannibal was interesting. He followed Will's conversational patterns and met him at every turn. Talking to Hannibal was like playing tennis, having the ball returned quickly and easily bouncing it back. Will enjoyed it.

Will sighed and got out of bed to feed the fire. There was still enough wood to keep himself warm for the foreseeable future, and Will was eternally grateful to Beverly. She was always there when he needed her.

His mind returned to Hannibal as Will picked up his notebook and pen from the bed, sitting in the chair by the fire to write for a while.

Hannibal had been there for him too, oddly enough. The man had a life of his own, and a profession, yet he had put it all aside in order to take care of Will, though they hadn't known each other for even a month at this point.

Hannibal had come to help Will, when Beverly hadn't been able to. He had thought to charge Will's phone, making it possible for him to ask Beverly for help. He had cooked and cleaned and monitored Will's condition for nearly two entire days.

It was bizarre, but Will had liked it.

Will allowed himself to drift to his other reality. The one in his book. He wrote, working up to the conclusion of the novel. He would start editing tomorrow, and he thought it would be ready to send to his editor and publisher by Wednesday of the next week. By the end of the month, it could very well be published.

He had filled several pages when his phone went off. It pulled him back to reality, and he got up to find out what was going on.

Will saw it was one of his reminders to get up and eat, and this time he didn't grumble. He smiled and shook his head, again thinking about Hannibal.

Hannibal had suggested these reminders to keep Will healthy. It had been in the capacity of a psychiatrist at the time, but now they felt more personal. It felt like Hannibal checking in on him.

Will huffed and shook his head. He was being ridiculous. He hadn't ever had persistent thoughts like that before, and he knew why. He didn't tend to like people, and people didn't

tend to like him. He avoided attachments, other than Beverly, because it never lasted and he would rather be alone than be lonely.

But now, he *did* feel lonely. Having had Hannibal here, in his house, for an extended period of time, Will felt his loneliness more acutely than ever before.

His phone chimed again, and he couldn't help the grin that spread across his face when he saw what it was.

Good afternoon, Will. I hope you are feeling well. I left soup in the refrigerator for you.

The man texted like he was drafting a letter. Will wasn't at all surprised. It was funny, and he liked it.

Will wondered if Hannibal knew this was one of the times he had his reminder set for. Will's phone had been off or silenced for most of the time when he had been there, but he supposed Hannibal could have seen the screen light up once at this time.

That did pose an interesting question: Had Hannibal chosen this time in order to make Will think he was somehow cosmically attuned, or just because he knew Will would be looking for something to eat at that time?

Will wouldn't put it past Hannibal for it to be the first one. He could see the man had a tendency towards subtle manipulations like that, and he really did want Will to see him as a friend. As strange as that was to think about, Will knew he would have to consider it when looking for motivations behind Hannibal's actions.

You're a life saver. Thanks

Will sent his reply and headed to the kitchen. He decided against using the microwave, just on the grounds that Hannibal's cooking deserved better. He set it to simmer on the stove and checked the news. He hadn't had the chance or the brain capacity since his run in with Lounds, and didn't even know what she had said about him.

Hannibal probably knew. He had probably printed out the article and brought it with him like the other one. Will didn't know why he hadn't brought it up, but he supposed it was nice he hadn't been upset with Will over it.

Will groaned aloud when he read the article, and knew why Beverly had shouted.

Freddie was framing it like a threat on her life. It hadn't *necessarily* been meant that way, but Will had wanted her to leave him alone.

This would be something Jack wanted to know about.

Under the article, Will saw that about half the comments were from his fans. The responses ranged from disbelief, saying he would never have said such a thing, to agreement that someone ought to put Freddie in her place. Some of them insisted it had been a dark joke, saying that should be expected from someone who wrote the things he did.

Will knew Jack would be looking into every single person in the comments, with special attention to those who claimed to agree with him. But they wouldn't find the killer among them. This killer wouldn't do that. They would use that as a way to distract the FBI, leading them astray. This killer had already made their statement. The next time they were heard from would be when another body dropped.

The soup was warm, and Will sat at the table to read more of the comments while he ate. It was idle entertainment, instead of writing. He would probably have about a hundred new ideas by the time he was done, but for the moment he did not need to write.

As he read, Will began to understand this killer more intimately. It was as if all the examples of that the killer was not provided enough of a contrast to what they were that Will could see them clearly.

These people were crass, so the killer was not. They would be polite and well spoken. These people knew very little about what they were talking of, so the killer would be intelligent and concise. These people flaunted their obsession with Will's books for all to see, so the killer would be calm and subtle, possibly never even mentioning his knowledge of Will's existence or work.

Will wondered if Jack could see this. If the agent in charge of this investigation knew the things Will did. Surely, they had more information than Will, and had people on a team with the purpose of thinking of exactly these things. They must know.

Hannibal could tell the man was law enforcement by the way he held himself. He stood with authority and suspicion, as if anyone and everyone could be a suspect in some crime.

"How can I help you?" Hannibal asked calmly, giving the man an expression of sincerity and complete engagement.

"Doctor Lecter," the man said, offering his hand with a smile that was meant to put Hannibal at ease, "my name is Jack Crawford. I'm with the FBI. I was wondering if I could ask you a few questions."

So, this was Jack Crawford. Hannibal studied him and saw he had no intention of letting Hannibal refuse politely. Though he could not legally force Hannibal to tell him anything, he would play along for the time being to see what information he could get from their conversations.

"Of course," Hannibal replied genuinely, stepping aside to let Crawford into the office, "I hope I am not a suspect for anything."

Crawford grinned as if he was really amused by Hannibal's small attempt at humor.

"No, no. Of course not, Doctor. I actually wanted to talk to you about one of your patients."

Hannibal allowed himself to visibly hesitate.

"Then I'm afraid I will not be of much help," he said, "doctor patient confidentiality is something I take very seriously. Unless I believe a patient is a danger to themself or others, I cannot legally discuss them."

Jack nodded. He had already known that, so he was not dissuaded. He had come here despite it.

"I understand, Doctor Lecter," Jack said, as if he meant to honor it, "but I still think you might be helpful."

Hannibal knew there would be no getting rid of Jack for the day, and that was fine with him. He intended to use that to his advantage.

"I'll be glad to help in any way I can," he said.

Jack nodded again, used to getting his way.

"I guess you've heard about the recent murder that had some resemblance to something that happened in one of Will Graham's books," he said, and Hannibal agreed, "Well, what kind of person do you think would do that?"

This amused Hannibal. Jack was asking him to give an unofficial profile of the killer. Through this, he probably hoped Hannibal would slip and give away something about Will.

"Unfortunately, I don't think I can help you there either, as I have not read Will's books, and the only information I have about the murder is what is on the internet."

Jack visibly deflated at that.

"You mean Will hasn't talked about it with you?" he asked.

Hannibal smiled wryly.

"If he had, I'm sure I couldn't tell you," he replied.

Hannibal watched as Jack Crawford became angry. The man changed before Hannibal's eyes, no longer all smiles and charm. He was no longer trying to sweet talk his way into information. Hannibal knew he was about to demand answers.

"Look, doctor," Jack said, "I've got a dead man, stuffed with flowers, and not a stitch of evidence. I need something to go off of."

"And Will is your only suspect," Hannibal surmised, "because of this resemblance to his writing. I take it you have met Will Graham?"

Jack hesitated, but ultimately decided on honesty.

"Yes. I interviewed him," Jack said.

Hannibal nodded.

“Then you should know he has no reason to harm anyone, and he is far too intelligent to lead you directly to his own door if he did.”

Hannibal saw a spark of suspicious triumph in Jack’s eyes. It was exactly what he had wanted, and Hannibal was satisfied.

“You have an awfully high opinion of you patient, Doctor,” Jack said, and Hannibal smiled.

“I see Will as a friend,” he replied, “And I hope he returns the sentiment.”

Jack hummed in agreement, considering what had been said. If he was half as good at his job as Beverly Katz was at hers, his conviction about Will being the key to the entire case would have just been strengthened. Any agent worth his salt would believe Will was at the center of everything, and Hannibal was counting on that.

Jack would continue to bother Will, never believing what he said, and pushing him further away from the FBI and law enforcement. As Will’s view of the FBI grew worse, he would begin to see what Hannibal was doing in a more positive light. And, of course, Hannibal would be leading him carefully along in his own way as well.

“Don’t you think that makes it difficult to be objective, Doctor?” Jack asked, and Hannibal tipped his head.

“It’s beneficial to my patients if they see me as a friend,” he said, “as it provides a sense of comfort and safety. For someone as perceptive as Will Graham, it would be useless to pretend such a thing. It works in my favor that I actually do see him as a friend, because he can sense it. He trusts me because he can.”

Jack didn’t seem to feel any differently in the face of Hannibal’s response. Hannibal hadn’t expected him to.

24

Will used his knife to open the fruit, the smooth skin of the pomegranate giving way beneath the sharp blade. He pulled it open and a cascade of teeth fell out, clinking against each other like shards of porcelain. They spilled out into his hands, a continuous stream that seemed to go on forever, filling his cupped palms and tumbling over his fingers.

The teeth were clearly human, and Will couldn't imagine how many people they must have come from.

There were so many teeth.

Will pressed his hand over the slice out of the fruit's skin, trying to staunch the flow of teeth out of the opening. He felt them swell up under his hand, pressing against his skin. Will pulled his hand away sharply when he felt pain, and looked down at his hand. There was a sluggish flow of blood from a jagged place where the skin had been entirely torn away.

He had been bitten. He could see the marks the teeth had left in the torn edges of his skin around the wound. It poured thick, crimson blood out onto the accumulating teeth on the ground at his feet, filling the air with the smell of copper.

The fruit grinned up at him with a gash filled with human teeth.

Will woke and slowly sat up in bed. He wasn't frightened or disturbed by his dream, but the absolute and horrific absurdity of it had drawn him back to wakefulness.

Will pulled his notebook to himself in the bed and quickly wrote down what had happened in the dream, though he had no intention of making any changes. If his dreams remained at that level of terror, he would be fine. He found the images so viscerally fascinating that he wanted to document it. In case he forgot when he went back to sleep, he wanted to be able to return to the idea and remember it.

He might be able to use it, or find some inspiration from it.

Will lay back down in bed and closed his eyes, finding it much easier to drift off nowadays. He didn't feel so threatened by sleep as much as comforted. He felt more safe going to sleep than he used to.

Some kind of psychiatrist black magic from Hannibal, he was sure.

"How have you been since we last spoke, Will?"

Will tipped his head back and forth as he scribbled away in the notebook.

“As well as can be expected,” he said, “My dreams have been more tame. They’ve gotten a bit more surreally strange, but that’s better than it could be.”

That was interesting. Hannibal wondered what that meant. Will’s dreams had already been of a strange nature, and Hannibal was curious to find out how they had changed since they began their conversations.

“Tell me about one,” he requested, and Will began.

As Will described his dream of the pomegranate filled with teeth, Hannibal marveled once more at the sheer power of Will’s imagination. The imagery it conjured to fill both his waking and sleeping hours were intrinsically striking in a way that Hannibal thought incredibly capable of eliciting emotions and reactions from a wide audience. Hannibal had heard of creators of various kinds of content sleeping dreamlessly after a long run of creating, as their brain had been dreaming during their waking hours. This didn’t seem to apply to Will Graham, who never lacked inspiration. His mind was a wellspring of ideas that never ran dry.

Will had not died in this dream. Hannibal couldn’t be sure what significance that had, but he made a note of it for further contemplation. It could signify he was becoming more comfortable with his own nature, or it could mean he was losing some part of him that was vital for coming up with the horrors his audience enjoyed. Hannibal would have to monitor the progression of this change.

“So, I don’t know exactly what to make of that,” Will said, then glanced up at Hannibal, “please don’t try to do any of that dream interpretation stuff. I’ve always hated that.”

Hannibal smiled, briefly considering what potential interpretations of the dream might be. There were a few, and he knew Will would scoff at all of them. He, himself, didn’t think they had any real bearing on reality, but he found them interesting to think about.

“I had no intention of doing so,” Hannibal told Will, “I find dream interpretation unreliable at the best of times. If there is any hidden meaning in one’s dreams, I believe the dreamer to be in a better position of finding it than I.”

Will smiled and nodded.

“I hoped you’d feel that way, just thought I’d put it out there in case. I’ve had too many shrinks try to interpret my books like they would a dream, and I never got around to telling them any of my dreams. You’re unique in that aspect.”

Hannibal hummed. He was pleased with that, and he hoped to be the one and only person to ever truly know Will Graham. He wanted to crack open Will’s ribcage and make a home for himself there, where he could not be eradicated. He would become a permanent fixture inside Will’s mind and body.

His obsessive infatuation was becoming far more serious than Hannibal had anticipated. He was becoming more aware that he was growing less and less capable of knowingly harming Will, and that could become a problem. If Will ever came too close to the truth, Hannibal may not be able to protect himself.

“You are taking care of yourself, and have not been feeling ill since you recovered?” he asked, feeling a bit foolish after the fact. He sounded like some fretting mother.

Will smiled warmly, apparently not put off by the strangeness of Hannibal’s behavior.

“Yeah. I’ve been keeping to that damn schedule the alarms won’t let me forget, and it’s working. I got back to my usual routine of writing and working. I’m nearly done with my next book.”

A strange expression came over Will’s face, then, and he stopped writing. He looked up at Hannibal, considering something for a long moment before he spoke again.

“This might sound weird, and maybe it will make you uncomfortable, but that’s why I have to ask. I wouldn’t want to do it without knowing if you’re okay with it first. I’ve just been thinking about it recently, and I think I decided what I want to do. All I need is your approval, because I wouldn’t do it if you don’t want me to.”

Hannibal leaned forward, intrigued. He wasn’t sure what Will might want from him, but he would be more than pleased to find out.

Will’s face darkened slightly with a blush and he chewed his lower lip anxiously. Whatever it was, Will was worried about how Hannibal might react to it. It only made Hannibal more curious, but he was content to wait for Will to speak.

“Well, I got the idea for something that happens in my book from you, and this whole thing,” Will gestured vaguely around the office, “and I was wondering if you would mind if I dedicate the book to you. I’m usually pressed for a dedication, because I don’t talk to that many people, but I think I’d like to dedicate it to you. Sorry if that’s weird. You can say no, especially if you don’t want your name associated with a book you’ll never read. I understand, and I won’t be offended. I just thought I’d ask, and roll the dice, you know?”

Hannibal was silent for a long moment. He hadn’t expected that. He didn’t know what this new book was about, and wasn’t sure what kind of idea Will had derived from their time together, but there was a dark desire in him to agree to it. He would find it an honor beyond words to have his name attached to Will’s work. He would be seen in conjunction with Will forever after, and they would be connected in the minds of Will’s readers.

It was tempting, and there was no small amount of dark amusement at the idea that Jack Crawford would find out and feel played. That would be so deliciously perverse.

“I would be honored, Will,” Hannibal said, and Will’s entire body relaxed in his relief, “but I would ask you for one favor in return.”

Will tipped his head, tapping his pen nervously against the notebook.

“What?” he asked.

Hannibal smiled warmly.

“That you sign my copy when I purchase it.”

Will grinned.

“Doc, for you, I’ll bring you one of the first printed copies. It’ll be a collector’s item soon enough. Even if you never read it, I’d be pleased to know you have one.”

Will answered the phone without checking the caller ID. He rarely did this, but he knew his alarm was coming up and he wanted to keep writing without pause until it did.

“Will Graham.”

“Yes. I know. What kind of man makes a spectacle of the tragedy he causes?”

Will froze, scowling down at his phone. He was going to have to change his number again.

“What do you want, Chilton?” he asked, no longer in the charitable mood.

“Come now, Will,” Chilton drawled in his self satisfied way, “are we not on a first name basis? I was your doctor for some time, after all.”

Will rolled his eyes, wanting to spit venom at the man.

“Two months,” he corrected, “not long enough to train a dog. But that’s not important. What do you want?”

Chilton sighed, as if this entire conversation was a burden to him.

“If you haven’t already figured it out, Will, I want to discuss these recent killings. Surely you feel some guilt for being the motivation behind them.”

Will scoffed and stood up, wanting a drink and knowing he wasn’t going to be productive on his book now. Chilton ate up all his patience.

“I’m not going to talk to you, Chilton,” he said, “you’re not my doctor, and you have no right to ask me anything. Unless you can come up with some reason I should stay on the phone, I’m going to hang up.”

“Wait.”

Will smiled. There it was. That desperation for something greater. Chilton wanted nothing more than to touch the fascinating, as he could never be fascinating himself. He thought Will was his golden ticket, so he was prepared to do whatever it took to seize him.

Will waited.

“I can help you.”

Will held back another scoff. He would listen, but only for his own amusement. He had no intention of agreeing to any deal Chilton might propose.

“You are being villainized in the press, and I can help change that. Allow me to interview you, and I will give a professional statement declaring you mentally well and uninvolved with the recent murders. The word of a good psychiatrist can do wonders for a reputation.”

Will grinned.

“Then I’ll ask Doctor Bloom for a few good words,” he said, “I’m sure she’d oblige.”

Chilton sputtered for a moment. Will always enjoyed that part of their interactions. Chilton was easy to push and pull in different directions until he no longer knew which way he was facing.

“Will, be reasonable. Doctor Bloom is only going to tell the truth as she sees it. She won’t consider your side.”

Will laughed.

“You’re encouraging me to find a biased reference?” he asked, “and *you*, of all people. If the tabloids could hear you now. What do you think they would have to say about this?”

Chilton ended the call, and Will laughed. He shook his head as he poured himself some whiskey, still laughing. His alarm went off to remind him to eat something, and he was still laughing as he fixed himself a snack.

He didn’t know if he’d regret that later, but it didn’t matter. Despite what Chilton would have people believe, he had very little influence. He was not respected in psychiatric circles, or by any group of people Will knew of. Perhaps there were a few Baltimore flat-earthers who thought he posed some interesting points, but Will didn’t think they would be a problem for him.

He would have to tell Hannibal about this.

25

The knock at the door surprised Will, and he worried for a moment over who it might be. If it was Beverly with the mail, she would have just walked in, knowing it was never locked and she was always welcome. He didn't know who else would show up unannounced at his little home in the middle of nowhere.

With the recent rush of attention to Will and his writing, it could be that someone had somehow figured out where he lived. He had been out and about much more recently, as well, which made it frighteningly plausible. If that was true, Will didn't want to consider the things he would have to do.

Eventually, Will opened the door and was flooded with relief to see Hannibal there with a brown paper package.

"Hello, Will," Hannibal said pleasantly, smiling with the same warmth he always did, "Beverly asked that I deliver your mail today. She is currently busy with work, and I was pleased to agree."

Will huffed a soft laugh. He fought a blush, knowing his hair was a mess. At least he was wearing actual clothes. He wished Beverly had warned him, but he knew she had probably hoped for a situation like this.

"God. I thought it was a stalker or something. Come on in," Will said, opening the door wider to let Hannibal through, "thanks. I didn't realize Beverly would become so fixated on the idea that she's not my only friend anymore. I bet she's going to ask you to do a lot of favors for me from now on. You can say no whenever you want. It won't hurt her feelings at all."

Will felt oddly energetic and excited that Hannibal was there. He felt better than he had in probably years. He guessed it was because he was taking care of himself, and he wasn't even ashamed to admit it anymore.

"I'm certain I would be pleased to help you with whatever she asks," Hannibal said, smiling and glancing around.

He was probably looking to find any sign that Will had been neglecting his health since Hannibal had seen him last, and Will laughed.

"The way you're acting, it's like you don't trust me," he said, "I've been keeping up on my new schedule of eating, like some exotic pet. You have a minute or so to hang around? I've got a story to tell you, and I bet you're going to think it's just about the funniest thing you've ever heard."

Hannibal raised an eyebrow, amused at the mere idea of such a tale. Will could tell he was going to agree, and it made him smile. Hannibal offered Will the brown package, apparently his mail for the whole month. It was larger than usual, but that was to be expected after everything that happened. Will took it from him, testing the weight in his hands.

“Of course I trust you, Will,” Hannibal said smoothly, “though I worry about you falling back into bad habits. Even the best of men have challenges. I do have some free time this evening, and can think of no better way to spend it than with you.”

Will grinned, trying not to seem too pleased by that. He didn’t know why he was reacting that way to everything Hannibal did today, but he didn’t want to show it.

“Alright. Here, have a seat over there by the window. I’ll sit at the desk and look through this mail.”

Hannibal did so, his expression warm and pleasant as he sat in the chair by the bay window. Will would normally have objected to anyone sitting there, having always jealously considered it exclusively his, but he didn’t even bat an eye. Instead, he just took his seat at the desk and opened the package to begin sorting through the mail.

Hannibal was pleased by his welcome. He hadn’t been sure what to expect from showing up unannounced at Will’s door, but it seemed he wasn’t at all upset by it. If anything, he seemed to be pleased himself.

Being allowed to sit in this chair without objection was not lost on Hannibal. Beverly had told him about this chair, in that time when Will had been ill. She had claimed he never even let her sit there, no matter what. It had sounded to be some sort of personal superstition, protecting his creative processes from the touch of an outsider. Hannibal was sure there was a significance to his being allowed to enter this space, even if Will was not aware he had done it.

“I got a call from none other than Fredrick Chilton yesterday,” Will said, and Hannibal felt a rush of jealous possessiveness well in his chest, “I don’t know how he got my number, but I didn’t check the caller ID before I answered. I don’t get many calls unless it’s Beverly.”

Hannibal nodded, fighting his violent urges down so he could appear to be casually listening. Will was incredibly perceptive, and Hannibal didn’t want to reveal his obsession.

“I presume he had a reason for calling,” Hannibal said.

Will hummed in agreement as he picked up an envelope and inspected it. He apparently decided it was nothing of note, so dropped it into the garbage can beside his desk.

“He wanted to offer me his services,” Will said, a twinkle of wicked amusement in his eye.

Hannibal raised his eyebrows, curious as to what on earth Chilton thought he could offer Will.

“He wanted to talk to the press, Freddie Lounds primarily, I assume, on my behalf. To redeem me in the eyes of the public.”

Ah. Interesting.

“I assume there was a price for his… intervention,” Hannibal said, and Will huffed a laugh, starting to stack a few letters that he deemed worth reading on the desk.

“Only unfettered access to my unique mind,” he said lightly, then rolled his eyes, “He wanted to interview me so he could confidently tell the public I am of sound mind and in no way involved with the recent murder. Foot-in-the-door technique, I’m sure you agree. Getting a conversation started with me on my mental state so he could push for more. He wants to be the one and only authority on the mind of the eccentric horror writer known as Will Graham. What do you think of that, Doctor Lecter?”

Hannibal smiled.

Honestly, he was incensed by it. Chilton had dared to call Will and try to impose on him, trying to use the current circumstances to leverage a conversation out of Will. Chilton had bothered Will to try and take what belonged to Hannibal. Will’s mind was not for Chilton, and he didn’t have the capacity to understand it. Hannibal mentally decided on a recipe for the incompetent psychiatrist, and hoped he would be able to invite Will over for a meal when it was ready. That would be a fitting end for the man.

“I think you had quite the response for him,” Hannibal said, hiding his reaction as well as he was capable, “you have a sharp and quick wit.”

Will grinned, glancing up at Hannibal for a moment before he returned to sorting his mail.

“I told him I’m entirely capable of finding someone competent to give me a character reference, if I felt I needed one,” Will said, and there was a glow of pride around him, “to which he begged me to be reasonable. To consider that he would be on my side.”

Hannibal felt a smile tug at his lips unbidden, having an idea what Will would have said in response to that.

“I told him I wouldn’t want a biased opinion, and he should be more careful what he says. He wouldn’t want the press to get the idea he’s just after notoriety.”

Hannibal huffed a laugh and shook his head.

“And to think he believes you in need of defense,” he said, “as if you are not entirely capable of doing so yourself.”

Will’s smiled grew, and he blushed lightly.

“I’m glad you think so. I bet he’s going to go ‘round trying to drag my name through the mud, but it was worth it just to hear him spluttering. I don’t care that much about my public image, but I don’t think being associated with him would do me that many favors either.”

Hannibal agreed entirely. Chilton was a fool, and most saw him as such. Freddie Lounds may offer him a platform, if only to slander Will. She would elevate his status slightly, by nature of how popular her work was, but she would turn on him the moment he tried to rise above her. And of the two, Hannibal was under no illusion of who would emerge the victor. Freddie

had a large following, and loyal fanbase. Chilton had a reputation for being a fool, and no supporters willing to defend him.

“I would warn you to speak with care, but I don’t believe you have a tendency to take your words for granted. Every time you speak, it is with precision and intention. I would not have wanted you to act any way other than you have.”

Will’s grin was brilliant, as if a sun had been trapped to shine from within him. Hannibal was entirely enchanted by this new creature. Will Graham, well rested and well fed, was an absolute vision.

“I guess, words being what I live by, I’ve learned to give them the thought and respect they deserve,” Will said, then jumped when his phone alarm went off.

Will cursed softly as he grabbed his phone from off the desk and shut off the alarm. Then, he stared at the screen of his phone with a frown for a long moment.

“Huh. It’s later than I thought it was,” Will said, glancing up at Hannibal, “want to stay for dinner, or do you have plans? I get it if you have a thing. I know your social life is a lot richer than mine.”

Hannibal felt a pang in his chest, and he didn’t even need to think about what he would say. He paused for long enough it would seem as if he were considering it, but he never had a doubt.

“I would be more than pleased to join you for dinner, Will,” he said, “I have no plans that would override an evening with you.”

Will blushed again, darker this time, but he was smiling.

“Alright. Just so happens I went fishing a couple days ago, so I’ve got something good. I’m afraid I don’t have any wine, like you’d prefer, but I have whiskey if that’s not an insult to your good taste.”

Will stood up and walked into the kitchen as he spoke. Hannibal followed, interested to see Will cook. He knew Will had not previously been in the habit of doing it often, but he had found no indication to tell whether or not he was good at it. He was curious to see, if only so he might have further excuse to impose his own cooking on Will in the future.

“I have nothing against whiskey,” Hannibal said pleasantly, “though I hadn’t realized I’d mentioned my appreciation for wine.”

Will flashed a grin at Hannibal, his face still pink from his blush.

“No,” he agreed, “you didn’t, and you never mentioned to me that you used to be an emergency room surgeon, either.”

Hannibal huffed a laugh.

“Your perception, as ever, leaves me unable to entirely predict you.”

26

Will was grinning like a fool, a strange feeling in his chest and abdomen that he couldn't remember ever feeling before. It was something like having a large snake slithering up and down between his lungs and his gut, rubbing against his organs as it contemplated eating him from the inside out.

Oh, he was so far gone. He was falling in love with his psychiatrist. This was *not* great.

To add to this, Will had just invited his high class, connoisseur psychiatrist who he was falling in love with to join him for dinner. He was going to cook for the man. The man who cooked like a professional chef. Will was going to cook fish for him.

Will was such an idiot.

Much like with everything else in Will's life, he was going to plow forward blindly, and hope for the best.

"I'm glad I can keep you on your toes," Will said, starting to get out the ingredients he needed for the meal he was planning, "I get the feeling not many people have the pleasure of really surprising you."

Hannibal hummed in agreement, accepting the glass of whiskey when Will offered it.

"I suppose not. In that respect, you have had the pleasure far more frequently than any of my acquaintances. I would venture to say I have not met anyone as adept at surprising me as you have proved to be."

Will felt himself flush with pleasure, far too pleased with the way Hannibal had said it. He really needed to tone this whole infatuation down a bit. It was not only ridiculous, but problematic. It was going to be a problem soon.

"Well I'll be damned," he said with a smile, "I didn't expect that. With the amount of-" Will was cut off by his phone ringing, and he frowned.

It was Jack Crawford. It was after regular business hours, which meant he was probably calling Will on his own time. That meant he would feel more free to stretch the rules a little bit, push Will more if he thought it would help.

Will sighed and answered.

"Will Graham," he said, and saw Hannibal raise an eyebrow curiously.

"Will. This is Jack Crawford. I need to talk to you again."

"I thought as much," Will said, tucking the phone against his ear as he began preparing the food, "I honestly expected to hear from you before now. You must have had your hands full,

looking into all the commenters on Lounds' article, and angry with me for saying something to her without thinking. I appreciate you letting yourself cool down before calling, unless this has all just riled you up more, which is also a possibility."

Jack was silent for a moment, and Will wondered if he had said too much. Hannibal's presence was making him a bit nervous, just because Will wanted Hannibal to like him so much now. He was rambling a bit more than he usually did.

"I'm not even going to ask," Jack said, as if that was an explanation for something of itself, "but I do need to talk to you about the article. You can bring your lawyer, if you want. When can you be here?"

Will huffed a soft laugh.

"Is this an official interview request?" he asked, "a bit late at night for that kind of call, Agent Crawford. Unless this is an interview I'll be mirandized for."

Will saw Hannibal hide a smile behind his glass of whiskey, making him smile as well. Maybe he was showing off a little. He didn't do that often.

"No," Jack said, "you're not being accused of anything. I know you haven't killed anyone. At least not directly. Maybe not intentionally. I just need to get as much of a full picture from you as I can."

Will nodded to himself.

Jack Crawford must have been really lost. There was no reason he should think Will had any answers if he wasn't involved, but of course he might say something Jack would see as significant without realizing it.

Will being himself, that was unlikely.

"Any plans to let Lounds know I'm not being accused of anything?" he asked, "just curious. She seems intent on convincing everyone I'm a murderer or a cult leader. I wouldn't mind a little backup from the FBI to clear that up."

Will could almost hear Jack grinding his teeth on the other end.

"If you help us catch this killer, I'll do whatever I have to in order to tell everyone you're not guilty of anything."

Will rolled his eyes.

That was worth a ton of fool's gold. If he helped clear his own name, then Jack would back him up. At least he knew Jack wasn't making any empty promises yet. That would be an easy thing to do.

"I already told you everything I could," Will said, "and I told you I want this person caught. I never wanted anyone to actually do the things I wrote."

That tasted like a lie, and Will knew he had just committed a lie of omission as well, but he had to be careful when talking to the FBI. He had told Jack everything he could during the first interview, but now he knew more. He had learned more just by reading those comments and thinking about it for a bit. He wanted the killer caught, but he also wanted dearly to see what they would do next.

Perhaps Will's inner debate showed on his face, because he caught Hannibal studying him curiously. Will tried to smooth out his features again. He didn't need his psychiatrist(/friend/something more?) wondering if he was having unethical thoughts regarding a murderer. At least not over dinner.

"I just want to clear up a few things with you. There are some details that have only recently come to light, and I want to see how they fit. Are you refusing the request for another interview?"

Will held back a sigh.

"No, I'm not. Go ahead and call Meadows to set up a time. My schedule is open, but I bet hers isn't. She can get back to me to tell me when you've decided on. Is there anything else, Agent Crawford?"

Will noticed Hannibal react to the name, and he made a note to ask about it when the call was over.

Jack didn't bother to hold back his sigh, purposefully letting Will know exactly how difficult he was being.

"No, mister Graham, there's nothing else. Have a nice evening."

Jack hung up without waiting for Will to respond, leaving Will to finish cooking while Hannibal watched. He sighed softly and shook his head.

It made Will feel a bit funny to have Hannibal there in the kitchen with him. He rarely did anything with company, and knew Hannibal was more than familiar with his kitchen. Hannibal would know what he should be doing, and Will wouldn't know when he was doing something technically wrong.

Still, he didn't want Hannibal to leave. He wanted him there, even if it made him slightly jumpy and hyper-aware of himself.

"I presume that was the agent who has caused you so much trouble," Hannibal said, and there was a strange, sour tone in his voice.

Will glanced at Hannibal with a frown. Hannibal's expression was carefully blank in a way Will didn't see from him often. Hannibal was usually fairly open in his expressions, though they were looks of amused curiosity more than anything. It was something Will had been surprised by, but not displeased.

“Agent Jack Crawford,” Will said with a nod, “wants to clear up a few details he wasn’t satisfied with from our first talk. I guess he’s getting desperate. Catherine will keep him in line as much as she can, but if another body drops I don’t know what he might do. He won’t be held on a leash for long.”

A ghost of a smile passed over Hannibal’s face at that. He was still clearly concerned, but slightly less upset.

“No, I imagine not,” Hannibal agreed, “he does not seem to be the type to accept defeat.”

Will considered that for a moment, little tumblers clicking in his mind.

“You’ve met him,” he said, and Hannibal gave a real smile, “he came to you, because you’re my psychiatrist. He wanted to know if you think I would kill a man.”

Will turned to fully face Hannibal, his own expression blank to avoid showing any expectation for the other’s response.

Hannibal tipped his head, his eyes sparkling in that way they did when Will said something he thought was clever.

“You are even more brilliant when you are in fair health than you ever were in poor,” Hannibal said, and Will huffed, “you cannot turn off your perception. You cannot help yourself from making these observations.”

Will blushed and turned back to the fish. He didn’t want Hannibal to think he was getting a big head about this. He had never liked being able to see people this clearly. It felt like a curse more often than not, and hadn’t ever earned him any friends. Beverly was an anomaly as far as Will was concerned.

But Hannibal was never upset by what Will said or saw. He always acted as if this was some sort of blessing, to hear what Will thought.

“I’m sorry,” Will said, though he knew Hannibal didn’t want or need an apology, “I shouldn’t say everything I think. It tends to get me into trouble.”

Hannibal smiled and shook his head, as Will had known he would.

“I would rather hear every thought that passes into your head, no matter how unsavory, than have you hide anything. Are you worried what I might have said to Agent Crawford when he came asking about you?”

Will shook his head, still not daring to turn back to face Hannibal. His face was too warm from Hannibal’s words.

“No. I know too much about you. I know exactly how you would react to him,” Will said, trying not to sound as if he was as vain as those words would imply.

Hannibal laughed softly. It was a pleasant sound, and Will liked that he could make Hannibal laugh.

“Please, Will,” Hannibal said pleasantly, “tell me what you believe I would say to such a man.”

27

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Will blushed so prettily. Hannibal wondered if Will could see how he felt, and if that was effecting his reactions. Regardless, Hannibal would enjoy this time while it lasted.

Hannibal was only slightly disappointed to see that Will was preparing the fish very well. He supposed it was only to be expected, because Will enjoyed fishing and would not likely see the food wasted by poor preparation. Still, it meant Hannibal had no excuse to impose his own food on Will. Not more than necessary. Will was capable of feeding himself properly.

“You would tell him in no uncertain terms that you are not legally permitted to share anything we have discussed, or your opinions of it,” Will said frankly, though he had still not turned back to Hannibal, “he would have argued, or tried to work around it.”

Hannibal tipped his head, studying Will as he worked. While he would have liked to see Will’s face while they talked, he wouldn’t deny this angle was something to be savored.

“You do not think such an accomplished man as Agent Jack Crawford could have convinced me to tell what I do not wish to?” He asked, just to hear Will talk more and use his sharp mind.

Will laughed and shook his head, giving Hannibal a glimpse of his flushed face.

“Not you,” he said, “ *Doctor Hannibal Lecter* is too good for that. You wouldn’t say anything you don’t mean to, or had previously decided to say. If you had made up your mind to tell Jack everything I’ve ever said, you would have. But I don’t think you did. You don’t think it’s any of his business. There are probably things you could have said, very easily without any legal repercussions, but you didn’t. I bet you refused to give him a thing.”

Hannibal was pleased by this. It was clear Will trusted Hannibal entirely, and had a mistrust and dislike of Jack Crawford. That had been exactly as Hannibal wanted, and he was pleased.

“You have much faith in me, Will,” Hannibal said, “I wonder what I have done to earn that.”

Will turned around with two plates, and his face was still pink. It seemed he had run out of excuses to keep his back turned.

“I trust people as far as I can tell they can be trusted,” Will said simply, setting a plate in front of Hannibal and taking a seat around the corner of the table, “At least when it comes to my interests. My perception makes it so I almost never trust someone too much, but it means people can tell when I don’t trust them as much as they think I should. It can be offensive.”

Hannibal could imagine people might find it offensive if they were used to fooling those around them. Hannibal, himself, would likely have found it so if he were not so interested in

Will as a person. He often made fools of those he spoke with, but found Will's keen perception to be fascinating. Anyone who could cut through Hannibal's illusions was worth his time and thought.

And Will had proven worth more than that.

"To be considered trustworthy by you must be a high honor," Hannibal said, smiling as Will took a bite of his fish and tried to hide his darkening blush, "I consider myself fortunate to have this chance."

Will smiled a bit, mirroring Hannibal's expression unconsciously. Hannibal took his own bite, and was simultaneously pleased and disappointed to find that it was quite good. Will was not in need of food from Hannibal now.

"This is delicious, Will," Hannibal said, "I confess to being curious before now, but you have proven quite an accomplished cook."

Will grinned brightly, his blush darkening, and he ducked his head.

"Thanks," he said, "I didn't expect I'd ever cook for you, though. I know it's not at all up to your usual standard. I can cook a few things well enough, but I'm sure nothing as nice as what you're used to."

Hannibal smiled warmly. He hadn't meant to give the impression of snobbery, but he also didn't think that was what Will meant by his words. Will didn't believe Hannibal was disgusted by his food, but rather that he knew of more fine cuisine. Will believed there was fundamentally something about his own food that would be seen as less. Will was keenly aware of how others saw the world, even when he did not agree.

"While every dish varies in complexity and effort, the quality of taste is dependent only on thought given. This is no less delicious than anything I could have made," Hannibal said.

Will's ears were red with blush, and he couldn't lift his eyes to Hannibal's face.

"Let's talk about something else," Will said, "I can't keep arguing with you about this, because you're just going to keep saying things that put me at a loss for words. We both know I'm weaker with my words when speaking than when writing, and you seem intent to trip me up."

Hannibal huffed a laugh. It was incredibly charming to get Will like this, when he was shy and unable to meet Hannibal's eye, not out of fear, but from being overwhelmed with positive things.

"What would you have us speak of instead?" he asked.

Will chewed his lip for a moment as he considered it. Then, he glanced up and met Hannibal's eyes for a moment, and seemed to come to a decision.

"Why didn't you tell me what Freddie had said about me?" he asked.

Hannibal paused. He hadn't expected that. He rarely predicted Will's actions or words, but there were some that took him more by surprise than others. He had not thought Will would have concerned himself with what Lounds had said past the fact that it had been said.

"I did not want to worry you when you were ill," he said, though he could see Will didn't entirely believe him. Clever boy.

"You let me ask you about the murder," Will challenged, and Hannibal tipped his head in a sort of shrug, "I was ill, and you wanted to know my thoughts on the murder, but not what has been said about me in my absence."

That was interesting. Will had not seen that at the time it happened, or he surely would have said something. He had not had much control to keep any thoughts to himself, as far as Hannibal could tell. Will was reliving his memories from that time, and observing Hannibal retroactively. That was fascinating.

"I admit to that," Hannibal said, "I was curious. You so often censure your own thoughts, even with me, to hide what you consider distasteful. I was tempted to learn what your true feelings were on the murder done in your name. I apologize, as it was clearly out of line and rude to ask you when you were ill. I should not have done so."

Will rolled his eyes in a mildly childish manner, though Hannibal again only found it charming. It was also justified, so he was not irked in the slightest.

"If I remember correctly, I specifically asked, and gave you permission to bother me despite my condition. It's not like you showed up just to bother me."

Hannibal had actually expected that. He had known full well Will would not be upset with him. He had made sure it had been entirely Will's choice to speak of the murder. Will had asked to see, asked to talk, and Hannibal had only agreed to his friend's whims. Hannibal had known Will would remember. He had been cursed with perfect recall.

"I could have refused," Hannibal said, "to spare you the trial of speaking about such things while ill."

Will scoffed, but he was grinning.

"Do you like to argue with me?" he asked, "because I feel like we always end up having the most strangely polite arguments I've ever heard."

Hannibal smiled.

"A blade cannot be sharpened without friction, and a mind cannot be sharpened without disagreement. Your wit is already so sharp I often wonder what it may do when put to practice."

Will huffed a laugh and shook his head. He leaned back in his chair, comfortable and at ease. It was a stark contrast to the exhausted, strung out, anxious man Hannibal had first glimpsed in the library, hiding behind glasses he did not need. Different from the few pictures there had

been on the internet, of a man with his head down and hair in his face to avoid being seen or recognized. This was an entirely different creature, and Hannibal was besotted.

"I'm the writer between us, but you have a quicker mouth. You speak like a poet. I would my horse had the speed of your tongue."

Hannibal felt a warm rush in his chest at Will's words. The man was quoting Shakespeare to Hannibal. That was almost universally a romantic gesture, even as Hannibal believed Will did not intend it that way. It was something that Hannibal could cultivate and shape into what he desired.

He wondered how Will would respond to his gentle prodding.

"I was born to speak all mirth and no matter," Hannibal replied with a smile, "where I can weave a tale with my words in conversation, your words on the page are more powerful. I have yet to inspire an artist of any kind."

Will tipped his head, his eyes suddenly focused razor sharp on Hannibal. Hannibal felt as if Will could cut away his skin and sinews to gaze directly into his ribcage at his heart and lungs. It was a unique thrill, and he relished it.

"You call them an artist," Will murmured, as if he hadn't considered it yet. Hannibal was curious about that. "You can't possibly understand them the way I do, but you see the beauty in what they have done."

Hannibal was awed by Will's words. While Will could not truly understand what it was he had just said, Hannibal thought it almost absurdly true. Will had an understanding of Hannibal even Hannibal could not claim.

And was that not entirely fascinating?

"There is beauty in all things, both creation and destruction," Hannibal said, "and this artist creates from out of the destruction they cause. In this, they have beauty from both."

Will nodded distractedly, humming thoughtfully to himself.

"Yes," he agreed, "they do."

Chapter End Notes

So... I just moved to a different state and may or may not have internet to be able to update when I usually do.

Here's a playlist I've been making for this fic:
https://open.spotify.com/playlist/2DXnvZAH1c5qTTTIHSSHVL?

si=89b7d4968c424199
Feel free to suggest songs you think would fit or be funny <3

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Hannibal was on his way home, and Will called Beverly.

“Pigs must be flying around somewhere out there,” Beverly said by way of greeting, “I never thought I’d see the day when you call me first, unprompted.”

Will sighed and rubbed at his eyes. He was nursing a glass of whiskey, the bottle he had opened with Hannibal. It was his better stuff, in deference to Hannibal’s tastes, and he wondered if Hannibal had been telling the truth about not minding the change of beverage. Will couldn’t always tell with Hannibal, which was a unique and thrilling change from usual.

“I know,” Will said, “I’m a terrible friend. You have a few minutes to talk? I know you’ve been swamped, but I’m in some deep trouble here.”

There was a brief silence from Beverly.

“Is it Jack? Has he been bothering you? I know he wanted to bring you in again, but I didn’t think he would get to you so quick.”

Will huffed a laugh.

“No,” he said, “I mean, yes, but that’s not the trouble. The trouble is Hannibal.”

That earned another pause, longer this time.

“I’ve got time,” Beverly said, and Will could imagine her sitting down and steepling her fingers to listen intently, “spill.”

Will smiled wryly and took a drink from his glass.

“Remember when I said he’s not my type, and he’s not the kind of person I’d waste my feelings on?”

Beverly audibly inhaled, preparing for what Will could only imagine would be a squeal of delight.

“Yeah,” she said carefully.

Will braced himself, closing his eyes and gripping the phone tighter.

“It was all a lie. I was lying to myself, and now I’ve got a problem.”

Will pulled the phone away from his ear as the squeal he had expected tore through the speakers of the phone and he imagined the components of the phone shattering from the sheer force of the sound. The shards would cut through his hand and face, scarring him from the amount of joy Beverly felt on his behalf.

"Oh my god. This is the best thing ever. You're the healthiest I've ever seen you, and you're head over heels for someone. I never thought it would happen. Him being your shrink isn't a deterrent?"

Will grimaced and ran a hand over his face.

"I mean, he's the one who suggested he didn't have to just be my psychiatrist," he said, "we're friends now. I feel like that means it's less weird?"

Beverly laughed giddily.

"Absolutely. The guy nursed you back to health. I think that qualifies as more than professional. And he is absolutely into you. I can tell."

Will smiled nervously, turning his whiskey tumbler on the table. He chewed on his lower lip, not sure exactly what he was supposed to do.

"Based on the time of day you're calling me, I'm guessing Hannibal dropped by with your mail and stayed for dinner?" Beverly said, sounding suggestively curious.

Will bit his tongue.

"Yeah," he admitted, "I invited him in so I could tell him a story, and he ended up hanging around. I'm so far gone, Bev. It's not a joke."

Beverly laughed.

"I'll bet. I don't know if I've ever heard you sound this way. You really have it bad. At least it doesn't seem hopeless. I do really think he likes you," she said.

Will sighed and took another drink of whiskey.

"What am I supposed to do about it, though?" he asked, "I'm not exactly prime dating material, in case you haven't noticed. *And* I'm under investigation by the FBI. Do you think that would be a problem?"

Beverly laughed again, and this time it was hard, She laughed as if she couldn't help it. Like she was dying.

"Princess, if that was a problem for him, Jack wouldn't be ready to pull his fingernails to get him to talk. People who have a problem with it always crack under pressure."

Will felt his face heat up, and he groaned softly.

"Is Jack going to *make* himself into a problem?" Will asked, "is he going harass Hannibal? If he finds out Hannibal's not really my psychiatrist anymore, will he work harder against him? Can he get a warrant for that kind of thing?"

Beverly sighed, and Will could picture her shaking her head. He knew her well enough a phone call was almost the same as a conversation in person. At least for Will.

“The most Jack could do is pull him in for an official interview. Doctor Lecter, being himself, won’t be interviewed without legal counsel, and he probably has a better lawyer than even Catherine. Don’t you worry your pretty little head about him. But if you ever get worried again you could ask him directly. I bet he’d talk to you about it.”

Will downed the last of his whiskey and let a breath out through his teeth. It wasn’t all that helpful to be told to ask Hannibal if he felt the investigation was a hinderance to any potential developments of their relationship. Will would probably never feel comfortable outright asking him like that.

And the Hell of it was that he knew Beverly was right. Hannibal would definitely talk about it if Will asked. The man wasn’t nervous about talking about anything as far as Will could tell.

Will jumped in his seat as he remembered something, and cursed loudly at himself. This was probably the worst thing he had ever done to himself.

“What?” Beverly asked, sounding startled.

“Oh, nothing much,” Will said, gritting his teeth and trying not to bite his own tongue off out of regret, “Just that I’m a total idiot. I don’t know what I’m going to do now. I feel like I’ve made everything incredibly awkward.”

“What did you do?” Beverly asked, sounding suspiciously on the verge of laughter.

Will sighed and rubbed at his brow, wishing he could go back and do his entire life over.

“I’m dedicating my next book to him.”

There was a beat of silence before Beverly did actually erupt into another bout of laughter. Will laid his head on the table and hated himself for the entire time Beverly laughed, until she finally calmed down and spoke again.

“Good job, Casanova,” she said, nearly laughing out the words rather than speaking, “That’s not going to make anything awkward if you break up.”

“We’re not even dating,” Will objected, “At least not yet. And it’s not like he reads my books. He’s never talked about them at all other than this recent murder thing, and maybe this won’t make anything awkward. Maybe it will be fine.”

Beverly huffed a laugh, making Will feel *so* much better.

“Yeah. I’m all for encouraging you to be optimistic, but that’s stretching it. Things are going to be awkward. That’s just the way your life is. But it will all work out, too. Don’t worry.”

Will scoffed.

“Why don’t I feel comforted by that?” he asked.

Beverly gave the verbal equivalent of a shrug, which was oh so helpful.

"Just shoot your shot," she advised, "if all else fails, you can flee the country and change your name, grow out your beard and wear nothing but tacky Hawaiian shirts with cargo shorts and sandals. He'll never find you, and no one will know."

Will lifted his head from the table so he could drop it back down, creating a satisfying thud. He wondered how many soft thuds like that it would take to crack his skull, and how many more after that until his brain would leak out through it. It would look quite nice, staining the table and dripping onto the floor.

"Stop damaging your darling head," Beverly told him firmly, "I know you're banging it on the table. You'll ruin your chances entirely if you damage your brain all that much. I doubt Hannibal's into vegetables."

Will lifted his head, though he pouted. It would probably have been simpler for everyone if she had allowed him to spill his brain onto the furniture. It would at the very least have gotten Jack off his back about this whole thing, and get him out of dealing with his feelings for Hannibal.

"What do you think he is into?" Will asked, suddenly analyzing his entire life and realizing he had no idea what Hannibal's tastes in partners was, "Should I shave? Should I start wearing fancy clothes? Should I cut my hair? I don't know how the hell to do this kind of thing."

Beverly tisked softly. Will got the feeling she was exasperated with him more than usual, but that it was somehow in a good way. She would rather be frustrated about this kind of thing than the usual, which was him just neglecting his entire life.

"I know you're basically antisocial and all that, but I'm going to lay it all out for you, plain and simple. Hannibal is *already* into *you* , so whatever you're doing is already working for him. If you want to change your style, do it because you want to, not because you think it will make him like you more. Got it?"

Will frowned dubiously. That sounded fake, but he guessed he didn't really have anyone else to consult on these matters.

"Alright," he conceded, "I get it. I hope you're right about this, though. If I make a complete fool of myself, I'm not letting you know what country I move to when I grow out my beard and wear nothing but ugly clothes until I die."

Beverly laughed.

"Deal. Now get some sleep. I bet your alarm has already gone off to tell you to go to bed. What would Doctor Lecter say if he knew you were staying up late?"

Will thought Hannibal would be curious, though not terribly concerned. It wasn't all that late, and Will could still get to sleep by the time he usually did. Hannibal would probably be more concerned with *what* Will was doing instead of getting to bed than the fact that he was.

"He's not my keeper," Will replied.

Beverly laughed again.

“Sure.”

29

“I wish I could just *talk* to Will, you know?” Franklyn asked.

Hannibal internally grimaced at the man. He spoke Will’s name so casually, as if they knew each other. As if Franklyn had ever actually had a conversation with Will.

“I understand you have this desire to connect with someone you see as great,” Hannibal offered, “and you feel you could bring something to him that he lacks. What might you have to offer, Franklyn?”

Franklyn wrung his hands nervously, the picture of anxiety.

“I could help him. I could help people understand that he’s not behind this all,” Franklyn gestured vaguely around, “everything that has happened. I could help people see that it’s not his fault.”

Hannibal would have liked to laugh at that. Franklyn didn’t know what had happened to the last person that had offered to help Will in that way. His ignorance would have been more amusing if it were not so irritating.

“Do you suppose he has no one on his side to fight for him?” Hannibal asked, setting his tone to sound genuinely curious rather than defensive.

“No!” Franklyn quickly replied, waving his hand defensively, “Of course that’s not what I think. I just think that he might not, or he has told everyone not to talk to the press. He’s a very private person, you know, and might not want anyone saying anything about him, even in his defense.”

Hannibal had to physically restrain himself from asking Franklyn just how he expected to become friends with Will if he was already planning to disregard his wishes as to his own privacy, and go around talking to the press about him against his express requests. Franklyn seemed to be just ignorant enough to be oblivious to the reasons this was a poor plan and would end as such.

“Why do you suppose he is in need of defending now?” Hannibal asked, “what about current circumstances puts him at risk?”

Franklyn floundered for a moment.

“The murder,” he decided eventually, “the murder that recreated something he wrote in his book. So many people think he has to have been involved or had something to do with it. He needs people to say he didn’t do it.”

Hannibal nodded. He, personally, disagreed with this conclusion, but he was used to that when speaking with Franklyn. He rarely agreed with anything Franklyn said.

“I am sure many of his loyal fans are coming to his defense in every forum available,” Hannibal said, “There is opposition in everything. When anything is said, there will be those who disagree.”

Franklyn nodded, his expression making it clear he felt as if Hannibal was completely validating his position on the subject, despite the fact Hannibal was doing no such thing.

“Oh, of course. So many people love Will’s work. He would never be alone in a fight like this. I don’t think I would be the only one. I just think it would be better if someone close to him was there to give some insight,” he said, “So Will could have a real friend fighting for him, instead of a fan who follows him blindly.”

That was humorous. Franklyn, who had never read an entire novel written by Will, claimed to follow him less blindly than others. He would claim to be better than them in some aspect. If only Will would talk to him.

Franklyn constantly fluctuated between devastating self-doubt and crushing narcissism in this way. It was frustrating when Hannibal was trying to talk sense into him.

Franklyn’s expression brightened suddenly, as if something had come to mind that changed everything about his poor, pitiful existence.

“Will’s new book is going to be out soon,” he said cheerfully, nearly vibrating in his seat for excitement, “It’s called Typhoid and Swans, and it’s going to be amazing. I hope he’ll do another book signing after the release. I want to get all his books signed someday.”

Hannibal nodded. He had known all about the book already, and perhaps knew more about it than Franklyn. He wondered how Franklyn would react when he discovered the dedication page, or if the man would even bother to read that part. Franklyn may be someone who has no real interest in who the book is dedicated to, as many are.

“Will you attempt to read this new novel, as you have the others?” Hannibal asked.

Franklyn nodded emphatically.

“Of course,” he said, “Someday I’ll find one I can get through. I just have to work harder to become the kind of person who could be his friend. If I can read his books, I’ll be that much closer.”

Hannibal doubted that very much, but he was in no mood to argue about it today. Franklyn was somewhat draining to be around, and trying to make him see reason in these things only exacerbated the fact.

“If this is the book you find you are able to read, what course of action would you take to befriend Will Graham?” Hannibal asked.

Franklyn frowned. It had apparently never occurred to him that he would have to be active in his desire for friendship with Will. He thought the moment he had the chance to speak with

Will, everything would simply fall into place and Will would realize what a truly good friend he could be. Will would see him and decide to let him in.

“I, uh, I guess I’d just try to find a chance to talk to him,” Franklyn said, his fingers trembling slightly as he wrung his hands again. “I could help him.”

There it was again. The assertion that not only did Will need help, but Franklyn could offer it. That Will would want help from Franklyn. It was Franklyn’s only line of thought, it seemed. The idea he always fell back on when asked for specifics. It was like a mantra he repeated to himself, the one thing he believed above all others. In this, he found both purpose and despair. If only, if only, if only.

Hannibal wanted to redirect Franklyn’s obsession away from Will.

“Instead of focusing on how you might be able to help someone you have not yet been able to become acquainted with, I would like you to try considering how you can help yourself,” Hannibal said gently, “It is important to help yourself before you will be able to be of any use to those around you. When you feel as if you have improved, you may move outward and begin helping those you see as friends already. You are not yet at a point where it is feasible to help someone you cannot reach.”

That got ahold of Franklyn’s tongue and held it. Franklyn was unusually quiet as he thought it over. Hannibal had been trying to nudge him in this direction before, but this was the first time he had said it so frankly. Franklyn was nearly incapable of picking up cues such as Hannibal had been trying, so now was the first time he really understood what Hannibal had been telling him.

“I should work on making myself a better friend,” Franklyn concluded, and Hannibal inwardly groaned.

That was not what he had said, and far from what he had meant.

“If that is the part of yourself you think could do with the most improvement,” he said carefully, “I want you to identify areas where you could become better, with work, and I can help you identify ways in which you can work on it.”

Franklyn nodded thoughtfully, clearly still misunderstanding what it was Hannibal was asking of him. Hannibal doubted there would be any way to make him understand. Franklyn had only one mindset, and Hannibal had yet to find a way to break him out of it.

Their time was over, and Hannibal was relieved to send Franklyn on his way. He checked his messages and found Beverly had messaged him while Franklyn had been talking. He smiled when he saw what she asked, and contemplated how to work this for his own purposes. It would not be difficult. Beverly seemed open to suggestions from him.

-Any recommendations for good tailors in the area?-

Hannibal carefully formulated his response, smiling to himself.

-I know of a few, though of course it would depend on the style and type of suit you would like, as everyone has their specialty.-

There was a long pause, and Hannibal wondered if he had made a mistake that made her no longer want his opinion. Then, her response came, and his smile grew.

-What would you recommend for Will? If, hypothetically, he wanted a suit to wear to the release party for his new book.-

Perfect. That was better than Hannibal could have hoped for.

And he gave her his answer.

“Are you sure about this?” Will asked, trying very hard not to bolt out of the shop when the guy (Will assumed he was a tailor) glanced at him. He wanted to write something, and he didn’t want to be here.

“Absolutely,” Beverly said with a nod, “I have a little free time, because there haven’t been any developments in the case and no new body has dropped. You want to show your guy how well you clean up, and that you can be an actual person in a public setting. This is the best opportunity, and I have it on good authority this is a good place for this.”

Will cast her a dubious glance, but went along with whatever it was she was doing. He had gotten himself into this mess, after all.

Sure, the publishers had insisted he have an actual party instead of just discretely releasing the book into the world with little to no fanfare. That hadn’t been in his control. But *he* had asked Beverly to help him get a new suit for the event.

Will was desperate to have the party go well. He had found out Hannibal liked to host dinners, and they were basically the talk of high society. Only the beautiful and wealthy were invited to Hannibal’s table, and the food was of highest quality. It was something rare and coveted to be given a seat at his dinners.

Will wasn’t surprised about the food being amazing, especially because Hannibal always either made the food himself or oversaw the making of it. He was an accomplished chef, especially for someone who had never done it professionally.

He was surprised that Hannibal hadn’t mentioned it. If Hannibal enjoyed doing such social things, and entertaining a large gathering, it seemed strange he would willingly spend any time with someone as unsocial and unrefined as Will.

Instead of doubting himself, as Will always had done in the past when it came to things like this, Will had felt encouraged. If Hannibal prioritized spending time with Will over spending time hosting these parties, Will must mean something to him. Will must be special in some way to the man.

There was a dark, possessive satisfaction Will felt in his diaphragm, as if it controlled his ability to breath. He tried not to let the feeling grow jealous over Hannibal's time and attention, because he knew there was a potential for that and it wouldn't be good for him.

Will was snapped back to the moment when he heard Beverly use the term **French cuffs** .

"What?" he asked.

Beverly shrugged as she looked at fabric samples. The tailor guy had gone to a different room, supposedly to retrieve something.

"We want you to look classy, don't we?" Beverly asked, "French cuffs are *classy* ."

Will narrowed his eyes at her. That was *highly* suspicious.

"I guess I didn't realize you were such an expert on suits," he said.

Beverly offered another shrug and gave him an innocent smile.

"You don't know everything about me, pretty boy."

And Will understood.

"You talked to *Hannibal* about this," he accused, "You asked him for suggestions. I can't believe you, Bev. I said I didn't want him to know about this, and you went around behind my back asking him to recommend styles. I bet he recommended this shop, too."

Beverly rolled her eyes.

"Hey, man, try to keep that psychology voodoo off of me," she teased, "you know it messes with my aura."

Will scoffed. Beverly conceded.

"But yeah, I asked Lecter for a tailor I could go to to get you a suit. I didn't ask him to design a whole suit for you, really. He was just so excited to do it, I couldn't help myself. You guys are going to be so cute together."

Will shook his head.

"That's it. We're leaving. I don't even want a suit anymore. I changed my mind. I'm not going to the party, and I'll live the rest of my life alone. Maybe I'll move to another country, like you suggested."

Beverly caught Will's arm as he turned to leave, as he had known she would. She gave him wide, imploring eyes in the way children did when they wanted their parents to do something for them.

"Come on, Will," she said, "He *really* wants to see you in a suit. *I* really want to see you in a suit. Just think about what Freddie's face will look like if she sees you looking that good."

Beverly knew all the tricks to getting Will to comply, and he sighed. He hadn't really meant to leave, anyway. He had just wanted to express his frustration, and knew how things would turn out.

"Fine," he said, "but I want to make it clear I am not happy with this. I didn't ask you to get Hannibal's opinion, and I am not happy."

Beverly nodded, though it was clear she didn't much care about Will's declaration.

"Alright, fine," she said, "let's get you this suit. Or a few."

"Bev."

30

Will's father had raised him to the best of his ability, considering the circumstances. There may certainly be an argument that children suffered from the lifestyle they'd had, but Will was and had always been satisfied with his upbringing. He had no complaints.

Will's imagination had always run wild, and he had few outlets as a child. One thing he had started doing was writing things down. They hadn't been books or stories back then. They had just been jumbles of thoughts, ideas, and images. It had been a way to compartmentalize, for Will. By putting these thoughts on paper, Will had been able to organize them in his head and make sense of them.

Will's dad had started buying him notebooks. Whenever he had money, he would get a notebook along with the groceries. Will had kept every notebook, recognizing the small sacrifice for what it was.

Will's dad had never been good at expressing himself, but Will had never needed him to. Will could always see and feel how people felt, so he had known that his father had loved him, and these notebooks were tokens and evidence of his love.

Once, a storm had sprung a leak in the roof where they lived, and every notebook Will owned had been ruined. He hadn't cried, only felt a dull emptiness in his chest, as he threw out the hundreds of pages of random non-sequiturs. He hadn't needed them. Once they were full, he could have thrown them out right off. He had kept them because he liked to see them all together, know his father loved him, and know they were filled with his thoughts.

That was why Will kept all his notes. Some of the notebooks were gifts, and reminded him he was not alone, but they were *all* a manifestation that he and his mind were not enemies. He could handle his own disorganized thoughts.

Will's father had quietly given Will another notebook the day after the storm, no mention of the stack that had been lost. He had not begrudged Will for them, and had never neglected to be sure Will had something to write in.

The notebook that came in the mail today was so unexpected Will didn't immediately know what to make of it. It was hardcover, glossy, dark red, almost black, with Will's name printed in silver. It was clearly expensive, and Will didn't know why anyone would have bothered to waste the money on him. Especially if they had any idea what would happen to the notebook. Will would fill the pages and then sit it on the shelf with the others, never to be thought of again.

Will opened the notebook and thumbed through the pages, seeing they were college ruled to give him more lines. He felt the paper, and it was the best kind, too. Not at all glossy or waffled, so the ink would dry quickly and not smudge easily. This was the perfect notebook.

An envelope slipped from the pages and fluttered to the floor at Will's feet. He stopped his inspection of the notebook and retrieved the letter, hoping it would give him some clue as to

who had sent it.

It did, but the sender was not exactly who Will had expected.

-To Will Graham,

I hope this letter finds you, despite your attempts to divert your mail away from your true address. I'd very much like to know what you think of my own work, but I understand that'd be difficult for you to do. I Will have another gift for you soon, and I hope you Will appreciate it. I was pleased with the reception of my first gift by the public, some horrified and some awed.

I think that's how your work should be viewed, with fear and respect.

I believe you're the only man who can truly understand why I do the things I do, because you have a similar darkness in your head and, rather than struggle with it as most would, you've learned to flourish in the shadows.

I Will not make this letter excessively long, to avoid boring you. I only hope this Will be of use to you and that you may think of me often.

Kindest regards,

Your Friend-

It was a gift from the killer. From whoever had recreated the scene from his book. Will hadn't expected him to reach out like this. He had thought the murder would be enough, a message to Will from the killer.

Will called Catherine, and asked what he should do, but he couldn't bring himself to tell her about the notebook. He only told her about the letter.

"You're sure it's from the real killer, and not just someone wanting to take credit for it?" she asked, sounding concerned more than doubtful, which Will was grateful for.

Will turned the brown paper the book had been wrapped in over in his hands. There was no return address.

"Yes," he told her, "they aren't taunting or trying to get a rise out of me. They didn't even mention the murder outright. They only alluded to it, knowing I would make the connection. If they wanted to take the credit, they would have sent this to the police and mentioned me by name, saying something about the police being incompetent. This isn't that."

Catherine considered it for a moment.

"Our interview with Agent Crawford is tomorrow," she said, "Put all of it into a bag and give it to me in the morning. I'll give it to them."

Will felt a stab of jealous selfishness, and it made him shut his mouth about the notebook again. He didn't want to give it to them. They wouldn't give it back. He wanted it. He wanted

to have it, and write in it. He wanted to put it on his shelf when it was finished and see it every day, remembering who had sent it to him.

So he said nothing about it.

"Alright," he said, "I guess I'll see you tomorrow, then."

Catherine hummed her agreement.

"Don't worry, Will," she said, "I won't let them do anything to you without putting up one hell of a fight."

Will smiled, but didn't feel all that comforted by the thought. She would fight them, but she couldn't stop them.

"Thanks," he said, and they ended the call.

Will stared at the notebook for a long moment, wondering if there was some way he could do the right thing and still get to have the notebook.

Will loved getting notebooks as gifts, and he felt selfish for wanting this one, but he did. People always gave him notebooks for holidays, if they knew anything about him, but this was by far the nicest one he had ever been given. He wanted it badly.

So, his next call was to Beverly.

"I'll be damned," she said by way of greeting, "being in love with Lecter is turning you into a regular extrovert."

Will's mind went momentarily blank as he wondered what in the world she was talking about.

"Oh," Will said eventually, now unsure what to say. He felt as if his entire train of thought had been derailed.

"What?" Beverly asked, now sounding concerned rather than lightly teasing, "Isn't that why you called?"

Will stumbled over his words for a moment, trying to put them together in a way that would make sense.

"Uh, no," he told her, "this has nothing to do with Hannibal."

"Huh," Beverly said, "okay then. What's this about?"

Will sighed, tracing the letters of his own embossed name on the front of the notebook.

"The FBI," he confessed.

Beverly was silent for a long moment.

“Is this going to endanger my job?” she asked.

“No!” Will said immediately. He would never ask her to do something that could get her into trouble. That was why he was asking her this. So she wouldn’t be in danger from whatever he chose. “I just want to know something.”

Beverly sighed lightly, and Will knew she would be shaking her head. He hoped she wouldn’t get in trouble with anyone for talking to him, but he might not even be doing anything against the rules. It depended on what she could tell him.

“What do you want to know?” she asked.

Will swallowed and steadied his nerves.

“If the FBI had something as evidence, would it be given back to the owner when they were done processing it?”

Beverly thought about it. Will hoped she would say he could eat his cake and have it too, but he doubted she would. He wasn’t that delusional.

“It depends on the crime, and the court proceedings and all that,” Beverly said, “Usually, they’ll hold onto it until everything goes through court, and then some things will be returned. Sometimes it’s a bit of a toss up. It depends on the crime, and the circumstances of it being taken as evidence. Some things get lost in the shuffle and never make it back.”

Will bit his tongue against a curse, not wanting Beverly to know just how much of a disappointment that was to him.

“Okay, just curious,” Will said lightly, “might use it in the next book. You know how it is.”

Beverly huffed a laugh, and Will hoped she was convinced.

“Yeah. Usually you just text me these kinds of questions and I have to type out an entire essay response. I don’t know why you decided to call this time, but I’m always happy to help.”

Will smiled, though it was more of a grimace. He felt like everything he said today was hiding the things he wasn’t saying. Lies of omission were everywhere, and he was starting to get anxious about them.

“And I always appreciate your help, Bev,” Will said, “you know it. Where would I be without you?”

Beverly snorted.

“Dead in a ditch somewhere, probably,” she said, and Will heard someone else on her end. She must have been at work or something. “Sorry. Gotta go. Talk to you later.”

The call ended, and Will struggled over the pit of dread and guilt in his stomach.

That had sealed it. He wasn't going to give them the notebook. He was going to withhold evidence, all because he selfishly wanted to keep a notebook gifted to him by a killer.

Will read over the letter again, noticing small things. For one, the letter never mentioned the notebook. Will thought that was most likely for this exact purpose. The killer had known he would give the letter to the FBI, and had given him an opening to keep the notebook.

The killer used contractions just about everywhere they could, except when one of the words was will.

They always capitalized Will, even when it was not in the context of a proper noun. They had probably done this because it was Will's name, and they wanted to draw attention to it or make him feel more directly addressed.

There was something slightly off about those two things, and Will thought they might have been done with another purpose in mind. The killer knew Will would hand the letter over, so was laying a false trail. They were establishing patterns that were entirely unlike their actual way of writing or talking.

It was genius. The FBI might not be able to tell the difference between what was real and what wasn't. They might think it was all real, which would lead to them looking at all the wrong people. They might think it was all false, which would leave them no better off than when they started.

Regardless, Will hoped handing the letter over would make Jack trust him a bit more. He hoped beyond hope Jack would stop treating him as a suspect, and instead listen to him as a source of information.

The rest of the mail had contained a few letters from people who claimed to be the killer, though they had all been easily dismissed as lies. Will thought about it for a moment before he pulled out two Ziploc bags. He carefully slid the real letter into one of the bags and sealed it, then dropped the rest of the letters into the other and closed it as well.

He would hand over all of them, as a gesture of good faith, and to further push suspicion away from himself. The more he gave, the less they would suspect he was hiding.

At least, he hoped so.

Will sighed to himself and sat in his chair by the window. He looked out at the trees and allowed his mind to drift for a while. He came back to himself as he realized Hannibal had sat in that chair.

Will hadn't even consciously decided to allow it or recognize what he had done, but he had. Hannibal had sat in the chair where even Beverly was not allowed to sit, and Will had allowed it.

If Hannibal had noticed that, or known about the significance of the chair, he would certainly have realized Will's feelings towards him. Hannibal was not a stupid man, Will didn't believe he could have fallen for anyone stupid, and he very well may have put the pieces together.

Hannibal's behavior had not changed noticeably while he had been at Will's house, but it was possible he had put it together after the fact. After he had left. Will would have to watch carefully to see if there was any shift in Hannibal's behavior the next time he saw the man.

But, for now, Will had a new notebook, and the stallion of inspiration was chomping at the bit. Will wanted nothing more than to set it loose.

Will opened the notebook, taking in a deep breath of the scent of fresh paper and binding glue. He clicked his pen and set it to paper, smiling as the words began to flow.

31

Hannibal was planning his next gift for Will.

He was sure Will had received the notebook by now, and he was curious to see if Will would hand it over to Jack. Will's decision would be telling, showing Hannibal where his trust really lay. Hannibal knew Will had no love for Jack Crawford, but this would give an indication of just how far the dislike reached.

Hannibal turned the page of the novel, allowing Will's words to wash over him.

Hannibal wanted to choose the best scene for his next gift. He was sure now that he had chosen the perfect scene for the first one, and he wanted to prod Will with concise movements. These were the things that truly mattered.

Will's words were always delicious to Hannibal. Whether spoken or written, Hannibal would gorge himself on the words Will chose.

Icarus Sky had been Will's favorite, and the scene Hannibal had chosen was similarly so. That had not been entirely luck on Hannibal's part. Hannibal had considered it for a long time, and had eventually come to the conclusion that it would rank highly for Will. Having met the man and spoken with him, Hannibal had been more sure than before, and he had made the leap. He was very pleased with the result.

Hannibal would not use another scene from the same novel, and was now faced with the decision of which novel and which scene would rank similarly. There was no shortage of material from which he could gain inspiration, two shelves of books dedicated to Will's creations.

One of the things that set Will's books apart from others in the horror genre was that he generally avoided the fantastic. His antagonists were nearly always entirely human, with no supernatural elements. It made the stories all the more frightening, because they seem possible and horribly likely.

People who read horror can often brush it off after as nothing that could happen, because demons don't exist, or some other element was simply supernatural. Will's books snare and snag the consciousness like a barb, because they were far too easy to believe possible.

That was something Hannibal particularly admired, especially because Will had managed to write so many novels that were each entirely unique, without including supernatural elements.

It also made it a simple thing for Hannibal to select a scene from the books to recreate, as Will's understanding of the limits of possibility was near perfect. Hannibal hadn't found one yet that he hadn't believed entirely possible if one had the intelligence, resources, and motivation to pull it off.

Hannibal possessed all these things.

Hannibal was considering taking a scene from Grotesque but Useful, if only to gather a larger audience. It might not rank alongside Icarus Sky in Will's mind, but it was by far his most popular work and would be instantly recognizable for anyone who viewed it. Even those that hadn't read the book were likely to know of the more prominent scenes.

It was an amusing thought, and became more enticing as Hannibal considered it. There was one death in the book he thought stylistically flowed well with the one he had already done. It was simple, not nearly as intricate as grafting a man into a tree, but beautiful and striking. Hannibal had seen a fair few artists try their hand at bringing it to life through their varied mediums, but he decided he would be the first to truly breathe life into Will's vision.

Hannibal closed the book, his decision made, and placed it back on the shelf with the others, smiling as he thought of the next to be joining them. The novel dedicated to him.

The offer had surprised Hannibal, framed as a request as it had been, but he had not even momentarily considered refusing it.

Hannibal wondered how Franklyn might react if he bothered to find out who the book had been dedicated to. He supposed he would have to deal with the aftermath of Franklyn's discovery, but it would be well worth it.

For now, Hannibal flipped through his business cards, a name in mind for his next gift.

There were preparations to be made.

"You'll come to the release party, right?" Will asked, running a hand through his hair nervously. He was sure Hannibal would already have plans, because it would be just his luck to fret over something just for it to never happen.

Hannibal smiled easily.

"I wouldn't dream of missing it," he replied, and Will felt equal parts relieved and panicked.

At least he wasn't worrying over nothing, but that still meant he had reason to worry.

"Okay," he said, nodding to himself, "I guess you'll kinda be the guest of honor, though I doubt many people will care."

Will winced.

"Sorry, that sounded awful. I just mean because there aren't many people who will bother to read the dedication, especially when they're at a party. They'll be more focused on getting my signature in their copy or catching me to ask for writing advice."

Will wished he could just stop talking. He hadn't always been a nervous rambler, but he liked Hannibal just enough for it to happen. He dearly hoped Hannibal wouldn't notice this about

him.

“Are you anxious about the party?” Hannibal asked, tipping his head curiously.

Will huffed a laugh and flipped the page of his notebook. The notebook Hannibal had given him to write in when they talked.

“What gave it away?” he joked, knowing he probably wouldn’t have said that if he was feeling any less anxious, “yeah. Alright. I’m not social and I avoid crowds at basically all costs. I might do better now you’ve got me eating and sleeping like a regular person, but I know it’s going to be like hell for the entire evening.”

Hannibal considered it for a moment, studying Will and making him feel mildly warm.

“Because of your heightened empathy?” He asked.

Will sighed. Sometimes he wished he hadn’t told Hannibal about that the first time they met. Hannibal was clever enough he could connect the dots more often than not.

“Yeah,” he admitted, “My head gets full of other people, and by the end of it I hardly feel like myself anymore.”

Hannibal nodded. Will thought he had probably guessed most of that already, just from what Will had told him and what he had seen. It was even possible Beverly had said something or other Hannibal had accumulated into his concept of Will.

“There are ways you can build barriers against the tide of other minds,” he said, “techniques to help you separate yourself from those you connect to.”

Will huffed a laugh and shook his head.

“A year ago, I would have said something rude to anyone who said that to me,” he said, “but you’re the only person who I think might actually be able to make them work.”

A thought struck Will, then, and he frowned. His anxiety spiked again, and he worried his lower lip. His scrawl in the notebook became slightly larger and less neat, and he had to stop or else it would become unintelligible. He grasped the pen in his hand and set his knuckles to the paper, wanting to just be done with this.

But he had to ask. He had to be sure.

“We’re friends,” Will said, wincing at the slight tremble in his voice, “right? That wasn’t just some psychiatrist bullshit you tried to sell me to make therapy more effective? If that’s what it was, I need you to tell me, because I’m really going to go insane right now.”

Hannibal looked surprised. His eyes widened fractionally before he frowned.

“Has this been truly bothering you?” Hannibal asked, his words colored with deep concern.

Will swallowed and closed his eyes. He nodded, unable to look at Hannibal as he did.

Will heard Hannibal move, and opened his eyes. Hannibal had stood up and was walking to his desk.

“Please, come here, Will,” Hannibal said.

Will didn’t know what was going on, but he stood and met the man by the desk.

Hannibal shifted a few papers around on the surface of the desk, and Will peered at them curiously. He hadn’t ever looked at Hannibal’s drawings up close before, and he wanted to. He knew they were good, but seeing them like this was different than seeing them from across the room.

Hannibal selected one and laid it on top, leaving Will entirely speechless.

It was him. It was Will, asleep in his bed with quilts pulled up to his shoulders. Will guessed this was how he had looked in that period of time when Hannibal had been taking care of him when he was sick. Hannibal had remembered and put it to paper later with stunning accuracy.

Actually, Will was pretty sure he had embellished it a bit to make the Will in the picture look less sickly and gross. That thought made Will’s skin break out in gooseflesh, but he wasn’t sure if it was for pleasure or confusion.

Will looked back up at Hannibal, but for once the man didn’t meet his eyes. Hannibal was staring down at his own hands, seeming uncharacteristically bashful.

“I understand you believe I would try nearly anything to get results from my patients, no matter how unorthodox, but I can assure you I have not done so with you,” Hannibal said, his voice low as if someone might overhear, “I hardly considered you my patient the first time you came to me, because I had already found myself genuinely interested in knowing you. Since then, you have been a person to me, rather than a patient.”

Will’s own philosophy mirrored back made him actually pause.

Hannibal was not only confessing he had always thought of Will as more than a patient. He was confessing he saw most of his patients as not truly people. The way Will saw most psychiatrists.

But Will was a person to him.

Regardless of the ethical implications of such a thing, Will felt his darker side enviously craving more. The beast in his mind preened and purred at the thought he was special to Hannibal, and every little indication of it pleased the monster. This was no small sign, and the monster was reaching for more.

Will had to contain it.

“Okay,” he said softly, “I’m sorry I doubted you. That was rude of me.”

Hannibal glanced up, a smile tugging at the corners of his lips.

“Not at all,” he said, though his voice hadn’t returned to his usual professional tone, “I understand your doubt. I confessed to a willingness to use unorthodox therapy, and you questioned whether or not I had decided to try it with you. You do not have a reliable track record with psychiatrists, and found the idea of me having a genuine interest in you hard to believe.”

Hannibal met Will’s eyes, and Will understood something.

Hannibal did like him back. Hannibal was interested in Will, the same way Will was interested in him. And he was confused about what to do about it.

Will would do something, then. But he would wait until the party. He wanted it to mean something, and he wanted it to be at the party.

“Thank you for putting my mind at ease,” he said with a smile, “I was just worried I’d gotten all comfortable when I shouldn’t have. As long as we’re people to each other, I guess that’s just fine.”

Hannibal smiled, then, and Will’s heart reached out with a vengeance, wanting to grip his ribcage and pull him in. Will just smiled back.

32

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"Will Graham," Jack said, setting a file down on the table, bringing the memories of their previous discussion to the front of Will's mind, "I understand you have some potential evidence for us."

Will nodded and Catherine produced the two Ziploc bags and set them on the table. The real letter was on the top, and Will had to restrain himself from staring at the neatly typed lines.

"Honestly, I think only one of the letters is really of any use to you, but I brought any I thought you might want. I want to show I'm cooperating to the best of my ability."

Will could tell Jack wished he wouldn't. It would be easier for Jack to be hostile towards him if Will would only give him reason to. Will was frustrating him.

"Thank you," Jack said, and accepted the bags when Catherine slid them towards him, "now, I want to talk to you about the murder."

Will nodded again, wondering why Jack felt the need to clarify that. He didn't imagine the man would ever come to him for anything like writing tips.

"I can't rightly guess what it is I would tell you I haven't done already," Will said, hoping he didn't sound like he was lying, "but I'll try to answer any questions you have, as long as my legal counsel says it's alright."

Jack glanced at Catherine and a brief expression of contempt flashed over his features. If Catherine noticed, she made no indication of it, and Will thought she must have to deal with things like this often in her line of work.

Will itched for a notebook and pen, wanting to write. He tried not to fidget like someone experiencing withdrawals, but he thought that might be the nearest thing to the truth.

"What was the motive of the killer in your book?" Jack asked.

Will had to bite back a response, because he knew Jack had read the entire book. He had forced the team to read the description of the scene, and had taken it upon himself to read the entire book in order to answer these exact questions. And the answers had been there.

Will smiled wanly.

"Would you like the plain answer, or the philosophical one?" he asked instead, because he had an idea Jack hadn't considered that yet.

Catherine shifted slightly, and Will could tell she was nervous about how Jack might respond. It didn't matter too much, though Will did regret putting her through all of this. Beverly had

been right. This was one hell of a circus.

Jack considered that for a long moment, proving Will right in thinking he hadn't already considered it. Jack's expression was the one people often wore when they thought Will considered himself much more clever than he really was. When they thought they had the drop on him.

"Both, most likely," Jack said, "but let's start with plain, as that shouldn't take as long."

Will agreed with him. Partly because this was the answer Jack already knew. He wouldn't be as prone to arguing about it or misunderstanding.

"The plain motive, meaning the reason the fictional man had for killing, was ecological preservation. The man was a preservationist, and wanted to protect places that were natural. The victim had been on a committee that had voted to destroy a park in order to build a shopping mall and parking lot. The killer was upset about that, and so killed him. It was all very poetically just, if not insane and brutal."

Jack had been nodding along, probably to encourage Will to say more than he had set out to. In fact, Will had now said precisely the amount he had planned on that subject, so fell silent. Jack looked up at him expectantly, letting the silence stretch between them in another attempt to get Will to continue.

"And the philosophical reason?" Jack asked when he realized Will wasn't about to say anything else.

Will looked at Catherine.

"I know it is going to initially sound very potentially bad," Will said, more to her than to Jack, "And I might not say it at all if I didn't think it would be of use to the investigation."

Will saw Catherine set her jaw and square her shoulders ever so slightly as she prepared for what else he would say. Satisfied she had been properly warned, Will turned back to Jack.

"The philosophical explanation is that I wanted him to."

Jack and Catherine had matching expressions of shock for a moment. Catherine had herself back under control first, then Jack schooled his own expression. Will's admiration for Catherine grew. She was better at this than the FBI's own.

"I want the record to show that Will Graham does not condone or encourage murder in reality. He is an author of fiction."

Jack waved her away, his eyes fixed on Will with vapid fascination.

"Go on," Jack prodded.

Will nodded, satisfied he had been understood well enough.

"The reason I think this is important to you is this is the part that seems to be of the most interest to the killer. I am the god of the worlds in my books, and I decide what happens. Therefore, every detail is my will. I wanted to write about a man who killed the committee member in that way, so he did it. The real motivation was purely divine."

Jack sat back in his chair, his expression pensive.

"What makes you think this is more important to the killer?" Jack asked after a long pause.

Will glanced at Catherine. She was clearly not pleased with how this was going, but she nodded. Will thought it was a gesture of good faith, saying she trusted his judgment for this one, regardless of if he had earned that trust.

"Just look at what they've done so far. They haven't been trying to contact you, and they haven't gone on a spree. It's just the one body, displayed exactly as I wanted it to be. They sent me a letter, not you. If they cared about why the man was killed, not how, then they would have contacted the public through a paper or directly to the committee members who made the decision along with the victim. I'm sure the killer picked a fairly similar man to the one in my book, and there would be such people. But they didn't do that. The killer didn't send letters to the people who would be to blame in my book, or the ones responsible for catching the killer, they sent one to me. They didn't brag, or ask if they had done well, because they are sure they have. They are sure of it, because it was my design, and they merely followed the blueprint. They didn't ask me to contact them, to let them know if I liked it. They said they'd like to know, but they didn't show any real doubt that I liked it. They're sure they have done well, and that I approve."

Jack was listening. For the first time, he seemed to be really, truly listening to what Will was saying. Not just with the intention of catching him in something, but actually searching for the meaning behind his words. To hear the information Will was trying to give him.

Learning.

Catherine was watching Jack carefully, probably anticipating a poor reaction. But Will could see he had finally gotten through.

"You have a knack for criminal psychology, don't you?" Jack asked after a long pause, seeming a bit fascinated. As much as he could be when only just getting over his prejudice.

Will smiled wryly.

"You should have done your homework, Jack," he said, "I was fitting to work with you in my salad days. I took all the courses and every class to be a profiler, and I was good at it. Don't call me vain for that, just see what I've done here. My one flaw is that I'm terribly imaginative, and that doesn't lend well to mental stability. I wasn't doing well at the time, and couldn't get into the FBI. I put my imagination to other uses, as you can see now. I'm doing better now than I was then, but I no longer have any interest in the FBI. Now, with all this mess, all I want to do is help you, and all you want to do is make a villain of me. How fair do you think that is, Agent Crawford?"

Jack frowned, but he didn’t seem angry. He looked for all the world like a man who had just had his entire understanding of the world shifted a degree. Will was satisfied he had finally gotten through to the man, and Jack would finally begin to act on what Will said to him.

“Alright. I can see I made a mistake,” Jack admitted, and Will thought that must have been very hard for him, being the way he was, “can you help me understand how we can catch the killer who did this? You understand them so well. There has to be a way to catch him.”

Will let out a soft sigh. He was glad Jack was listening to him, but there was something niggling at the back of his mind that told him this was betrayal. Betrayal to someone who had never doubted him or tried to accuse him of anything. Someone who had admired him from the beginning.

Will pressed forward, against that voice. He didn’t want to be complicit in any crimes, and didn’t want to encourage them. Of course. Of course he didn’t want that. He didn’t want more people to die.

But the notebook sitting on his desk at home called to him, telling him the killer had only made something beautiful. They had made something beautiful out of something ugly. And they thought Will’s work was beautiful. They were inspired by him.

The killer loved Will’s work.

Will was going to help catch them, even despite all this.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter was a mite short, but only because I think the next one is fitting to be long.
Stay tuned for it, because it's going to be fun.
Thank you for reading <3

33

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Will dressed for the party, his hands shaking with nerves.

“It’s funny,” Will said, standing in front of the mirror Bev had brought and feeling like a fool, “I don’t get nervous like this. Ever.”

Beverly gave him a sympathetic smile and stepped forward to straighten his tie.

“You’ve never had nerves like this, because you’ve never been head over heels in love with anyone, and planning to make your move at a fancy party in your honor,” she said.

Will winced at the reminder of what tonight meant.

“Yeah. I guess so. This is going to be a disaster. I’m a disaster. And it’s too late to go back. Maybe I can still bail if I’m sick. I sure *feel* sick.”

Beverly shook her head with a smiled.

“Nope. Tonight is your night, Cinderella,” she said, “you’re going to snag your prince and be the belle of the ball if it kills me. We just need to do something about your hair.”

Will swallowed hard, but followed Beverly as she headed to the bathroom. She was going to style his hair, he supposed.

Hannibal arrived early, wanting to be the first guest to Will’s party. He was, aside from Beverly, and he found Will immediately. He had to stop for a moment to catch his breath when he saw Will, because he had never seen him looking so gorgeous.

Hannibal had had an idea of what styles and colors would look best on Will, but he hadn’t truly been able to give it justice with only his imagination.

It was a three piece, in a deep royal blue that Hannibal had known would look fantastic with Will’s complexion and his eyes, but the vest was a light powder blue. His tie was a paisley pattern with both shades. His hair had been styled, probably Beverly’s doing, and he looked a vision. Hannibal was sure he had never seen a more beguiling sight.

Will was shining.

“Will,” Hannibal said, and Will turned to him with a nervous smile. He was holding the notebook in one hand, and Hannibal nearly lost his breath again. The notebook Hannibal had sent to Will with the letter. A gift that Will would only know as being from the killer. Will had kept it.

Hannibal walked up to Will with a smile and had to fight back the urge to pull him into a kiss right there.

“Will, you look fantastic, and I’m sure the party will be wonderful,” Hannibal told him, setting his hands on Will’s arms and giving him a reassuring squeeze, “there is no need to be nervous. Everyone will adore you.”

Will huffed a soft laugh and shook his head. He was slightly flushed, and his fingers tapped against the cover of the notebook anxiously. Hannibal thought he had likely not had the chance to write anything for some time.

“I’ll settle for not completely embarrassing myself tonight,” Will said, “I don’t need everyone to love me.”

Hannibal nodded with a smile.

“If you need to write, I’m sure no one would object,” he said, nodding to the notebook Will was gripping, “And I’m sure a fair few of your fans would try to read over your shoulder. They will be only more impressed by you when they see your clever script.”

Will flushed darker, but he smiled.

“Come over here and get your copy of the book,” he said, turning to where a table sat with stacks of books along the edge.

Will stepped around the table and plucked a copy of the book from a separate box. The cover was glossy and crisp, and the art showed a pomegranate pouring out human teeth. It was beautiful and strange, and Hannibal adored it.

“These are the true first editions,” Will said, gesturing to the box, “my personal order, to make sure the cover and formatting were how I wanted. Samples, basically.”

Will said this as he flipped the book open and began to write on the dedication page rather than the title page. Hannibal was pleased by that. Will wrote for a moment, apparently leaving a message rather than simply his signature.

Hannibal was curious what Will was writing.

Just as Will finished, a group of people walked in, accompanied by Beverly. Will shut the book and excused himself to greet them, handing the book to Hannibal as he walked away.

Will smiled brightly and shook hands, acting as the perfect host. Hannibal was pleased to see him doing so well, and hoped he could claim some part of it as his own intervention. He thought he could, as this Will Graham was a far cry from the one he had first seen at the library signing.

After a moment of watching Will with a smile, Hannibal opened his book to see what Will had written there.

-To Hannibal,

We both know I'm better at writing than talking so here we are. I hope you like my suit, since I only wore it for you.

I'm terrible at all this feelings crap. Maybe I should have just kissed you.

Will Graham-

Hannibal looked up to find Will again, amazed by what he had just read.

Will was now surrounded by people, all clamoring for his attention. The party was not set to start for another twenty minutes, but the room was filling fast. Hannibal was happy for Will, even though it meant he would be difficult to get to for the entire evening.

Hannibal was sure the party would be a great success. He had made sure word got around, because it would absolutely not do for Will to be disappointed, but he probably hadn't needed to worry. The recent to do around his books was enough publicity on its own. Hannibal was sure there would be people here tonight who had only a few months prior not taken notice of the name Will Graham. The demographic that read Will's books had expanded greatly recently.

Will was anxious to know if Hannibal had read the message, and what his reaction was. But there was a sudden influx of people coming in the door, and he was playing host to all of them.

Their personalities lapped up against the walls of his mind, and he was surprised by how little they actually managed to touch him. This might actually be bearable. Everything Hannibal had helped him with was working, and he could survive this.

Will glanced over at Hannibal when he had the chance, and saw him talking to Alana. He was holding the book casually in one hand as he spoke, and was smiling pleasantly. He didn't look like he had anything on his mind particularly. He was just a handsome dream across the room.

Hannibal looked up and met Will's eyes, and his smile grew into a grin. He was so brilliant, and Will was sure he would be able to make it through this night, just knowing Hannibal was there.

Will talked inanely with every single person who approached him, putting on the best facade of normalcy he could. He saw Freddie Lounds on the outskirt of the room, and wondered what she thought of the party. It was nothing like anything he had done before. It was like he was starting over again with his public image.

Or, she might think he was compensating for the recent murder associated with his work.

But Will could lean into that. Murder was actually great publicity for horror novels. He just had to be careful about how he went about it. He would have to be careful if she tried to talk to him.

There were a lot of students who wanted to ask him questions about writing, and there were some teachers who wanted to ask him about symbolism in his books. He was as polite and helpful as he could be, though he hated explaining his thought processes behind that kind of thing. He wanted people to use their own imaginations and their own logical thinking skills to figure things out. Not everyone would get the same answer, and that was the point.

It was tedious, but not nearly as exhausting as he had feared.

The first chance Will got, he headed over to Hannibal and Alana.

"Alana," he said brightly, "I'm so glad you could come. I know you don't usually read my books, and this one would probably make you think I hate all psychiatrists. I promise I don't. Especially not you."

Alana laughed softly.

"Or Hannibal, apparently," she said, turning towards Hannibal slightly, "You dedicated it to him. I guess he finally got through to you where I couldn't."

Will felt a bit stung by that, but he only continued to smile.

"Don't feel hurt by it, Alana," Hannibal said genially, "each of us requires a unique approach. We must find whoever meets our needs. Don't you agree, Will?"

Will felt his face flush a bit, but he just smiled and nodded.

"Yeah. It's really no one's fault, except maybe Fredrick Chilton."

That got a laugh out of both Hannibal and Alana, and Will was feeling alright about this all. He was doing alright.

"I will have to be leaving shortly, unfortunately," Hannibal said, and Will's heart dropped into his shoes, "but I would like to have a private word with Will before I go."

Hannibal took Will's arm and they excused themselves. Hannibal led Will to a separate room and closed the door behind them. He hadn't turned on the lights when they entered, and it was a small office room, nearly a closet. They were very close to each other, and Will felt his face grow warm.

"You have to leave?" Will asked, staring at Hannibal's tie because he couldn't handle meeting his eyes just then.

Hannibal sighed softly. His hand was still on Will's arm, and Will felt as if he was aware of the designs of his fingerprints even through the fabric of his suit.

“I regret to say I do,” Hannibal said, his voice just above a whisper. They were so very close. “But I could not stand the thought of leaving before I could get you to myself for a moment.”

Before Will could react to that, Hannibal had raised a hand and gently carded his fingers through Will’s hair at the base of his skull. He only briefly thought that Hannibal might be messing up the careful styling Beverly had spent so long perfecting. Most of his thoughts were preoccupied with the thought that Hannibal could easily snap his neck with that position, but he was choosing to be gentle instead. Hannibal was entirely physically capable of killing Will, yet he chose to be kind. These were strange thoughts to have in this situation, he supposed, but that didn’t stop him from having them.

“I feel as if I have neglected you, Will,” Hannibal said softly, “this entire evening, I have been fighting to control myself. You must not know how much of a temptation you are at all times.”

Will felt his breath catch in his throat, and he met Hannibal’s gaze. There was no discernable deception or mockery in those deep, maroon eyes, which only further shook Will.

Hannibal meant it. At least as far as Will could tell.

“What?” Will managed, sounding ridiculously breathless, even to himself.

Hannibal smiled, and the corners of his eyes crinkled with the expression of warmth.

“I hope you will not find this terribly uncouth of me,” Hannibal said, and leaned forward.

Will only realized the second before it happened what Hannibal was doing.

Hannibal was going to kiss him.

As it happened, Will had just enough forethought to raise his hands and grip Hannibal’s lapels. When their lips met, Will melted against Hannibal, unable to entirely believe this was actually happening. Hannibal’s hands roamed through Will’s hair, definitely messing it up now.

Hannibal almost pulled away, but Will pulled him back and deepened the kiss instead.

Hannibal reacted well to that, and Will could see through the cracks in his mask as Hannibal began to drop his regular decorum. He was hungry for this. Hannibal had been wanting this for some time, and had finally decided to do something about it. It awed Will, if only because he hadn’t realized just how much his feelings had been reciprocated. He had thought he would have to work a bit to find out if Hannibal would even be open to his feelings.

When they finally did pull apart, Will met Hannibal’s eyes again and saw that his pupils were blown wide. He imagined his own were as well, and he smiled a bit.

“People are going to talk,” he said softly, “I emerge from a private meeting with you looking as if I’ve been kissed breathless.”

Hannibal smiled as well, gently petting through Will’s hair.

“If you are still able to talk, then I have not succeeded in that respect,” he said.

Hannibal kissed Will again, and Will nearly let his legs buckle under him. He hadn’t known how good just kissing someone could feel when both parties really wanted it.

“Join me for dinner tonight?” Hannibal asked when they parted again.

Will was actually speechless, and could only nod in reply. It made Hannibal smile with a glimmer of self-satisfaction, and Will could only stand there, stunned, as Hannibal returned to the party.

Will took a minute to compose himself, tried to fix his hair as best he could and calm down the blush in his face. He knew returning to the party discretely wouldn’t really be an option for him, seeing as it was his book being released. People would see, and people would talk.

But was that really all that bad? Maybe if people thought he was in a healthy relationship with someone like Hannibal, public opinion would be a bit kinder to him. It would at least be a nice change from the articles being published about him recently.

Eventually, Will made his way back to the main gathering, smiling politely when nearly all eyes turned to him. Beverly caught his eyes and immediately began to make her way over. Will grabbed a glass of water and nearly drained it all in one go.

“You look a little hot and bothered,” Beverly noted, sidling up next to him, “and right after having a private conversation with Lecter. Is there a story to tell there?”

Will felt the blush rise to his cheeks again, and he tried to hide it behind another drink of his water.

“I guess the suit worked better than we expected,” He offered vaguely, “or we were a bit low when gauging the possibility of reciprocation.”

Beverly laughed.

“Look at you,” she said, “sounding so logical about it to compensate for all those messy emotions. You’re adorable.”

Will rolled his eyes at her.

“I guess I’m sort of dating Hannibal now?” he said softly, so only Beverly would hear.

Beverly grinned.

“Then he *did* ask you out,” she said then scanned him, “before or after he kissed you?”

Will felt his blush deepen and he wished this conversation could wait until some other time, but he knew Beverly would have none of that.

“After,” he confessed, “And he didn’t exactly ask me out. More like he asked me in. Dinner at his place.”

Beverly's grin widened, and she raised her eyebrows at him.

"You are so lost on each other," she said, "and you are *so* getting laid tonight."

Will nearly choked on his next breath, but managed to not make an entire scene out of it. That was good, because a gaggle of young women were starting to approach him.

"Mister Graham," one of them said brightly as the others cowered behind her, "can we ask you a few questions?"

Will nodded, trying to calm his nerves at least enough so he could have an intelligent conversation. Beverly made her getaway, leaving him to their mercy.

"Call me Will," he said reflexively, smiling as well as he could, "and fire away, as long as you don't want me to spoil the whole novel for you. I have a rule about that."

The girl laughed, and her friends seemed to relax a bit.

"Of course not," she said, then hesitated, "Will. We were wondering about the dedication in this one."

She held out the book and opened it to the dedication page. Will knew exactly what it said, and he was nervous about what they might ask about it.

-For Doctor Hannibal Lecter, who taught me the value of therapy-

Chapter End Notes

The party isn't over yet, and I have things planned for it. Stay tuned <3

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“What would you like to know? Will asked, genuinely curious even through his nerves.

“Well,” the girl said slowly, then one of her friends stepped in, working past her own obvious nerves.

“In all your past novels, it seemed like you always struggled to dedicate it to someone,” she said, “you did one to each of your parents, one to a neighbor from your childhood, and even one to a stray dog you knew once.”

Will internally grimaced at the reminder, but didn’t show his apprehension. This girl had done her homework, and he could already tell she had taken some psychology classes. She had recognized a pattern, making the breaking of it all that more obvious to her. She had glimpsed a part of him most never knew, because he had laid it out in the open.

“Yes,” he said, “you find this one different?”

The girl nodded, a spark of actual excitement in her eye. Her friends were smiling knowingly, having probably heard her thoughts already and knowing what she was going to say.

“The tone has entirely changed with this dedication,” she said, “it’s warm and friendly. Before, they all felt like obligations, something you were doing more for the sake of others than yourself. I feel like you actually *wanted* to dedicate this one.”

Will smiled wryly and nodded.

“I’m not sure what your question is, then,” he said.

The girl blinked. Will guessed she was the most intellectual out of her group of friends, but lacked confidence. That was why she had been hiding behind the leader of the group when they first approached.

“Of course,” the girl said, shaking her head, probably internally admonishing herself, “I was just curious, because even the dedication to your father felt impersonal, why the first genuine dedication would be to a therapist.”

Will huffed a soft laugh, lifting his eyes to scan the room. His gaze immediately gravitated to Freddie Lounds, who was watching him closely. He was sure she couldn’t hear him, but he had the feeling she knew somehow what was being discussed.

“I have a bad track record with psychiatrists,” Will confided, “but Doctor Lecter managed to surprise me. It’s a rare thing for anyone to surprise me, if I’m being honest, and that is an accomplishment on the good Doctor’s part. The dedication is also somewhat a private joke between us. Doctor Lecter will likely find it amusing if he ever deigns to read even the dedication page.”

The smart girl nodded thoughtfully, likely trying to come up with theories as to what all that meant. Will could tell she was used to making sense of things, and he wondered what she was planning to do with her future. She would do well, he thought, whatever it was.

The other girls appeared shocked.

“You mean he might not read it?” one of them asked, apparently forgetting she had been shy only a moment before. She looked up at him from under a flop of hair that was dyed purple.

Will smiled and shrugged. He could see Beverly making her way towards him through the crowd, and he thought he had only a moment left before he would be taken away from this conversation.

“I don’t think he’s ever read one of my books,” he replied, stunning the girls further, “which made him the perfect choice for therapist, though our relationship is no longer merely professional.”

Beverly took Will’s arm and began to drag him away. Will gave a quick goodbye to the group of girls, leaving them all confused, as he was brought to the next conversation. Beverly was making sure he actually socialized, mingling with whoever she could find that wanted to speak with him.

Will glanced around once more, though he knew Hannibal had already left. He had forgotten to ask why Hannibal had to leave, but he guessed it was important. Hannibal had actually seemed to be excited for the party, even though it was clearly not his usual type of thing.

Will saw Freddie Lounds making her way over, and he prepared himself for her.

“How do you come up with such frightening ideas for your books?” one of the men asked, and Will smiled politely.

“If I gave away the secret, everyone would write books like mine,” Will joked, “I wouldn’t have a chance of being noticed.”

The small group all laughed, and Beverly was grinning. Will thought he was doing really well, all things considered.

“There’s one person who would probably still notice you,” Freddie’s voice came from just behind Will’s shoulder.

Will turned to face her, raising an eyebrow. She took that as a bid to explain, though Will had no real desire to let her say her piece.

“Don’t forget there’s a killer out there who liked your book enough they thought they should bring it to life,” Freddie said, tipping her chin up defiantly, daring him to react to her words.

Will just laughed lightly.

“It would be difficult to forget such a thing,” he told her politely, “but I do my best.”

That earned him another laugh from the group, and he saw the slight waver in Freddie's expression. This was not the Will Graham she had expected to be facing tonight.

"Regardless, Miss Lounds," Will continued lightly, "I am hardly responsible for the actions of someone other than myself. Unless you believe I have the power of mind control, in which case I would certainly have used it to keep you from accusing me of it in the first place."

Freddie's cheeks flushed slightly, and Will felt a rush of triumph. She hadn't been prepared for him to stand up to her in that way. She had probably been hoping he would give her a veiled threat again. This time in front of reliable witnesses.

Will was pleased to disappoint her, and grateful he was feeling well tonight so he was able to meet her on even ground this time.

"You don't find anything wrong with writing stories that inspire violence in your readers?" Freddie asked. She sounded like she was grasping at straws.

Will suppressed a mad grin. Freddie shouldn't have said that. He could see the way it soured the moods of the people around. Freddie was in a room filled with people who read and enjoyed Will's work, and she had just implied they were all one wrong move away from becoming serial killers.

"I don't find anything wrong with writing fiction," Will replied, "and again, I do not choose how my readers act. I don't even choose what they read. They are making the decision to read my books, and they are making the decisions about how they act. I think it's a bit rude for you to insinuate that I have any power over their decisions."

Freddie's mouth nearly dropped open, and Will's words were met with a round of quiet nods and whispered agreements. He had the support of nearly everyone in the room, and Freddie was realizing the mistake she had made.

Freddie quickly escaped, scurrying away like a dog with her tail between her legs. Will turned back to the group he had been talking with before, finding that not only were all the people grinning at him, but people had joined the group. They were watching him with vapid interest, as if he were some kind of preacher about to give a sermon.

Will smiled brightly to them, feeling as if his face would be sore for days after tonight from all the smiling he was doing.

"Opposition in all things," he said, and his company laughed.

Will continued on that way, feeling his energy being slowly drained. It wasn't nearly as bad as it would have been only a few months prior, but he was still going to be tired after this.

Hannibal had invited him over for dinner.

That thought kept him going, counting down the minutes before he could leave this place. He kept remembering the feeling of Hannibal's lips against his own, and the way Hannibal had run his fingers through Will's hair.

“Excuse me, Mister Graham,” a voice said, and Will turned to see a portly man in a suit he didn’t seem to quite belong in. It was well made and well tailored, but his nervousness offset it in a way that made him seem as if he was trying to give the impression of someone who belonged when he really didn’t. He also looked familiar, but Will couldn’t place him just yet.

Will smiled politely to him.

“You can call me Will,” he said reflexively. He always said that when someone called him Mister Graham. “What can I do for you?”

The man held his copy of the new book in sweaty hands.

“I’m Franklyn. Franklyn Froideveaux. You dedicated your book to Doctor Lecter,” he said, shifting his weight from one foot to another, “do you know him?”

Will’s smile turned a bit more genuine as he thought of Hannibal.

“I’d like to say we know each other very well,” he told the man, “I gather you know him as well?”

The man met Will’s eyes, and Will saw emotions rolling around in them. Franklyn was feeling awe and betrayal and confusion, but mostly he was just excited to be talking to Will.

And Will remembered him. He had been at that signing in the library. He had had Beverly help him out the door, because Will had been able to see his overwhelming obsession.

“Yes,” the man breathed, “I’m one of Doctor Lecter’s patients. I don’t suppose he mentioned me to you.”

He might have, Will thought, remembering that Hannibal had said a few things about a patient who read the books.

“No,” he told Franklyn lightly, “He takes doctor patient confidentiality very seriously. Do you enjoy my books?”

The man’s face flushed lightly, and Will saw immediately that he hadn’t ever finished one of them. He was obsessed with Will, but not because he enjoyed Will’s books. He just thought Will was worthy of obsession because so many people did. This was a strange form of obsession, and Will didn’t like it very much.

“Of course,” the man said, sounding a bit rushed in his words, likely hoping Will wouldn’t see through the lie, “you have such a way with words, Will. Your imagery is striking and vivid, and that you keep everything within the realm of possibility is impressive.”

It sounded as if Franklyn was reciting an essay, and Will didn’t like the way his name had sounded in his mouth. He now wished he hadn’t offered to be called by his first name.

“Thank you,” he said, hoping Franklyn couldn’t see how pained he felt and how much he wanted to get away, “I’m very glad you enjoy my work.”

Franklyn looked as if he wanted to say something more, but maybe Will was being a bit more obvious than he meant to, because the man hesitated.

“Why isn’t Doctor Lecter here?” he asked, and Will thought this wasn’t what he really wanted to ask.

Will smiled, though he was feeling remarkably more drained now.

“He was,” he said, “he had to leave early. He was sorry to be missing it, but he came by to say hello and get his copy of the book. He was supposed to be my guest of honor, but duty calls.”

Franklyn nodded, clearly trying to look as if he completely understood. Will wondered what the man did for a living, and couldn’t imagine a single thing he would do well in. He just seemed like one of those incredibly nervous dogs who would hide under a bed shivering when a thunder storm rolled by. Will couldn’t figure out what he might do as his career.

Maybe he had been born into money, and had invested it. Maybe he didn’t have to work, which would allow him to indulge in his nerves full time.

That was all probably incredibly rude to think, and Will reprimanded himself for it, but he couldn’t help it. The man just seemed sad and pathetic.

“I’m sorry I missed him,” Franklyn said.

Will didn’t have to think of something to say to that, because Beverly pulled him away. It was a mercy, and he was grateful to her.

35

Chapter Summary

This chapter's a bit short, but it has some excitement. I hope you enjoy it. <3

Will smiled at Beverly, but it faltered when he saw the look on her face. She was holding her phone and frowning.

“I have to go,” she said, and Will’s heart dropped, “Jack says there’s something urgent in the labs. I can’t talk to you about it, but I really have to go.”

That would mean Will was all alone with this crowd of strangers. First Hannibal, and now Beverly. He would be on his own.

No, not entirely. Alana was there. She was at least a friendly face, if not as close or important as Beverly or Hannibal.

“Okay,” Will said, trying not to show how anxious this made him.

Beverly knew anyway.

“Are you going to be alright? I’m so sorry about this. I wouldn’t go if I didn’t really have to.”

Will nodded. He knew that. Beverly wouldn’t abandon him. This was important.

“I’ll be fine,” he told her, checking his watch, “I only have about an hour left, and I can hide behind the table the entire time if I have to. It’s only a shame I didn’t bring my glasses. I’m feeling a bit drained.”

Beverly nodded, then smiled at him slyly.

“At least you have something to look forward to once it’s over,” she reminded him.

Will flushed, and laughed softly.

“Go catch a bad guy,” he told her, “I have an audience to please.”

Beverly nodded, giving him a reassuring smile, and headed out.

Will didn’t have a chance to consider what might be so urgent she had to leave. He was pulled back into the throng, bombarded with questions and conversation. If he had, he would have known another body had shown up. That was obvious.

Will entertained for another thirty minutes, then decided he would do as he had said and sit behind the table to put a barrier between him and everyone else. Most of them had their books already, but his feet were tired, and he was ready to be away from them all. He couldn't wait for it to be over.

Just as Will got to the table and set down the notebook he had been clutching all night, he heard a familiar voice that made his blood run cold.

"Will Graham," Jack's voice carried over the sounds of the crowd, "you're under arrest on suspicion of the murder of Cassie Boyle. You have the right to remain silent."

Will turned and saw Jack, looking as tired and serious as possible. He wasn't joking, and he held up a pair of cuffs for Will to see. Will didn't know who Cassie Boyle was, but it didn't matter. He wasn't about to cause a scene in front of all those people. Freddie Lounds would have a heyday, but he also didn't have the energy to resist arrest.

Will was mirandized and arrested right there, in front of everyone. It was a public humiliation. Will understood what had made Jack do something that would normally be frowned upon. Jack thought Will had been playing him like a fool. Jack believed Will was the killer, and had been offering his help in order to chase them around in circles. Jack thought Will had been making him look like a fool for all the world to see, and that he had fallen for it.

So, despite generally not wanting to arrest a public figure in a way that could defame them if they turned out to be innocent, Jack had come to his book release and arrested him in front of a crowd of his fans.

There were murmurs, Will saw Freddie Lounds gleefully snapping pictures, and a few people actually called out objections at Jack. There might have been a few people there who understood that this was wrong, but Will knew this experience would stay with them forever regardless. Will held his head up, refusing to look defeated or guilty. He was tired, but this was not the time to break.

Once he was in the cruiser, and they were on their way to wherever Jack meant to interrogate him, Will set his head back and allowed himself to feel the pain of this situation.

He had finally gotten Jack to see him as more than a suspect, and now this.

Whatever had happened, Will wished it hadn't.

Hannibal hummed something softly as he prepared dinner. He hadn't expected this turn of the evening, but he was more than pleased. Will had not taken as long or as much guidance as Hannibal had thought he would.

Will's lips had been soft, and fit with Hannibal's as if they had been made for each other. Hannibal felt a low level of anticipation buzzing under his skin as he considered potential resolutions for the evening.

Hannibal's phone chimed, notifying him there had been something posted about Will. It chimed again. Again.

Hannibal's heart sank.

If the body had been discovered, as he had planned, it would not yet be circulating that there was a connection to Will. Not unless Freddie Lounds or someone equally as distasteful had learned of it and made the murder public. Hannibal doubted Jack would have allowed that to happen. He was determined to keep things secret for as long as possible.

Something must have happened at the party. After Hannibal left.

Hannibal put his cooking on hold to look at what had happened, and was stunned by what he found.

They had arrested Will. At the party.

That was *unforgivable* .

Hannibal had left no evidence to lead them to Will. He wouldn't have. He didn't want Will arrested. He didn't want Will to be taken from him. He hadn't wanted Will to be hurt.

There was no reason to arrest him other than the design of the death had been from another of his books. His most famous work, at that.

Jack Crawford must be insane if he thought the right thing to do was publicly arrest Will Graham for the murder. Will Graham had not killed anyone, as of yet, and Jack Crawford and the FBI would be humiliated when that was proven.

Hannibal put away the food he had been cooking. There would be no dinner tonight. At least not with Will. Dinner was forgotten entirely. It didn't matter anymore. Will would not be there, and Hannibal was not hungry.

Anger burned deep in his chest, and he wanted nothing more than to kill Jack Crawford for this. He wanted to see the man suffer and perish for this crime. This treason.

Jack would regret this.

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“This is an outrage!” Catherine was fuming, “how dare you subject my client to such treatment? A public arrest? Agent Crawford, I *will* see you punished for that. This is defamation and slander. You should have known better, and you will regret it. It would be one thing if he was a regular civilian, though it would still be highly questionable and unethical to arrest them in public, but it’s entirely another with Mister Graham being a public figure of some renown. At his *own event* of all things!”

Jack withstood it all, occasionally glancing at Will with such venom in his gaze Will was sure there was no way he would ever listen to another thing he said. Even when Jack found out Will hadn’t done this thing, he would never be able to convince himself to trust him. This had sown a seed of prejudice, and it would only grow. Will would never be able to count on the FBI to help him, regardless of Beverly’s intervention, and they would always be watching him from this point on. He would never be alone, because they would always be there, waiting for him to make a mistake.

“You may confer with your client,” Jack said, and left.

Catherine glared at the closed door, her gaze so hot with anger Will imagined the door turning to glass and shattering from the mere force of it, leaving sharp shards littered all over the floor and threatening to draw blood if anyone touched them. At length, she turned to face him, and Will sighed softly. She was still scowling, but her anger was not directed at him at all.

“That was incredibly unprofessional of Agent Crawford,” she told him, “Rest assured, I will see this put to right.”

Will smiled tiredly. He was ready to go to bed and sleep for a week, hopefully forgetting this entire debacle. He knew there was no undoing what had been done. He could be released, but there would forever be those that believed he was guilty from this day on. Even once the real killer was caught, he would be seen through suspicious eyes, as if he had something to do with it.

“Thanks,” he said, and Catherine’s expression softened with sympathy as she must have seen how exhausted he was. She was smart, but not unfeeling. He really did like her, and he was glad there was at least one person on his side here.

“I don’t suppose you can give me an alibi for when the victim was killed,” she said.

Will shrugged.

“I haven’t been told when that was, but I doubt it. I spend most of my time alone in my house, writing. I’m in a pretty inconvenient position that way. I was getting ready to publish a book in these last weeks, too.”

Catherine nodded as if she had expected as much. She was smart, but Will didn't know how she was going to get him out of this.

"Did they tell you what evidence they've got on me?" he asked, wanting to put his head down and sleep rather than struggle to prove his innocence. But he didn't have a choice.

Catherine pressed her lips together and let out a breath through her nose. Will wondered what she had been doing tonight. It was a Saturday, so it wasn't unreasonable to think she had been enjoying herself, going out with friends or having a quiet night in. Will thought she had probably been doing something with friends, though he didn't think she was the barhopping type. Something quiet and chill. Maybe they had gone to a movie, or an actual restaurant. Regardless, she was justified in being unhappy to be here instead of wherever she had wanted to be.

"Not a word," she answered bitterly, "and just so you know, they are likely to lie to you if they think it will make you admit to something or incriminate yourself. Don't say anything. Refuse to talk to them at all. We tried cooperation, and this is where it got you. Now you're going to flip the switch and stay silent. No matter what they say or do, don't say anything to them. Don't answer any questions."

Will nodded. His head was starting to hurt.

He wondered if Hannibal had heard what had happened yet, or if he was still waiting for Will to show up for dinner. He wanted to cry. He was tired, and disappointed, and angry.

"This might seem obvious, or rude, I don't know," he said, and Catherine raised an eyebrow, "but could I just lay my head down and sleep? I'm not likely to sleeptalk, but I'm exhausted. Would that be alright?"

Catherine, who looked like she wasn't all that pleased to be here herself, smiled lightly and nodded.

"There's no rule against it," she told him softly, "and seeing as they are acting like buffoons, I don't see anything wrong with being a bit rude to them in return. You go ahead and sleep. I'll see what I can do about getting you out of here."

Will nodded, letting his eyes slip shut and lowering his head to the table. It wasn't all that comfortable, but Will didn't care. He imagined it as the cool reflection of the moon in a pool of clear water at night, the coolness of the surface drawing the ache from his head and soothing his battered nerves.

He let himself drift off, wondering what kind of dream his mind would conjure to deal with this turn of fate.

Jack placed a folder on the table, his presence alone enough to rouse Will from his position with his head pillowed on his folded suit jacket. Will blinked blearily around for a moment as he remembered where he was and why. Catherine was glaring at Jack with enough venom

Will was sure it would kill him, but Jack only stared at Will with an expression almost equal in distaste.

“Hello, Jack,” Will said, sitting up and feeling his bones creak and object, “come to tell me why you’re so set on the idea I’ve done something wrong?”

Catherine shot him a warning glance, reminding Will he was supposed to take advantage of his right to remain silent. Will nodded, deciding he would keep his mouth shut now. He didn’t want to get on her bad side too.

Jack flipped open the file, and Will saw something that nearly made him go back on that decision immediately.

This was why Beverly had left the party early. Apparently, it was Will’s reason for leaving early too.

Will recognized it immediately. Nearly anyone would have. It was the most talked about display from his most talked about book. Even people who had never read his work would instantly associate his name with this image. It was almost the one thing that represented his entire life’s work in the public eye.

The girl, Cassie Boyle Will assumed, had been mounted on a stag’s head. The antlers pierced through her entirely in places, her thighs and chest and arms. Her head was craned back as if she was trying to look at something upside down, and her dark hair hung in a curtain below it, reaching toward the ground and nearly touching it.

While Grotesque but Useful was not Will’s favorite, did not in reality rank in the top ten in his mind, it had been the one that firmly established his place in the public eye. It had been the book that had revealed his penchant for those scenes of particular horrific beauty that he was now known for.

It had also been fun to write. Will had enjoyed it, and the theme of antlers he had carried through the book. He had always found antlers aesthetically interesting, and for this reason alone Will thought he could never hate this book. It was too much a part of himself.

Catherine had paled slightly when the pictures had been revealed, but she didn’t lose her composure. Will could guess she didn’t think this looked good for him, but he didn’t think she was ready to give up the fight.

Part of Will wanted to be insulted. Jack thought he would really be dumb enough to kill someone this way, when it was the most recognizable scene from all of his books. That would have been idiotic.

Will supposed Jack must think he had considered himself thoroughly beyond suspicion because of his cooperation, making him confident enough to be this bold. Criminals were not purported to be the most intelligent people, after all.

“Care to explain?” Jack asked gruffly, and Will knew for certain Jack wouldn’t believe anything he said.

So he said nothing. He just sat, staring at the pictures.

He tried to fight the awe and exaltation he felt at the sight, knowing someone had done this as not just a tribute to his work, but an offering and invitation to him personally.

“My client cannot be expected to provide an alibi if he is not informed of the time of death,” Catherine stated coldly, “and if he had any ideas of what motivated the killer this time, he could not be expected to share them with you after being treated in such an unprofessional manner.”

Jack smiled at her, but it was the smile of someone who was looking at one idiot standing in the way of a great achievement. There was no pleasure or even respect in that smile.

“I’m not interested in asking the suspect to consult on the case,” Jack said, “I just want to know why he thought we were stupid enough to not bring him in for it.”

Hearing Jack call him the suspect stung more than Will would have admitted. He respected Jack, at least as far as his position had allowed, and it hurt to hear that Jack didn’t trust him at all now.

Still, Will stayed silent. He wanted to put his head down again and go back to sleep. He didn’t want to be here, and he couldn’t see what good his presence was.

Hannibal was growing more and more frustrated. He had not heard from Will since the party, and it had been nearly an entire day since then.

Jack was delusional if he thought they could hold him. Hannibal knew for sure there was no evidence to implicate Will in Cassie Boyle’s death. The only reason Jack could have for arresting him in the first place was the connection to the books. And that was thin at best.

But what if Will had no alibi? He surely wouldn’t, because he rarely left the house. Could Jack hold him this long just for that? Would Catherine Meadows be able to talk sense into him? Was she good enough to get Will out of this?

The bell rang and Hannibal went to answer the door, still stewing over this predicament. He didn’t know who it might be, and he certainly wasn’t expecting anyone. It might be someone from the FBI, or even Jack himself. Here to try again to question Hannibal about Will.

Hannibal certainly wasn’t expecting to see Will, still dressed in the suit from the party sans the jacket, rumpled and tired. In his surprise, Hannibal froze in place, and Will was the first to move. He lunged forward and took the collar of Hannibal’s shirt in his hands. He pulled Hannibal into a kiss so violently it actually knocked the wind out of him, and he stepped backward, pulling Will into the house with him.

After a beat, Hannibal’s mind returned to him and his hands fell to Will’s hips to pull them flush against each other. Will hummed in agreement as Hannibal began reciprocating the kiss in earnest, and Hannibal kicked the door closed unceremoniously. He was trying to make

sense of this at the same time as he really didn't care all that much. Will's hands and hot mouth were his top priority.

But Will's lips were slightly dry and chapped, giving Hannibal just enough pause to pull away.

"What happened?" he asked, "have you been with the FBI all this time?"

Will dropped his head onto Hannibal's shoulder. He breathed in and out, catching his breath and calming himself. Hannibal could smell Jack and the FBI building on him. He had not had the chance to shower since the party, and Hannibal had an idea he could read the smells on his skin almost as plainly as one of his novels.

"They finally got a time of death on that girl, and it's the damnedest thing," Will said, his words breathy and almost laughing, "She was killed during my final fitting for the suit."

Hannibal's heart leapt in his chest and he smiled. He hadn't planned it, but it couldn't have worked out better if he had. Jack would definitely find it suspicious that Will couldn't verify his whereabouts at any time other than when he needed an alibi, but they couldn't hold him without evidence.

Which they wouldn't find.

"It was just icing that Beverly had been there," Will continued, "Jack just about wants to lynch me, but he trusts Beverly. She backed me up and he had to let me go."

Hannibal nodded, his cheek rubbing gently against Will's hair with the movement. His mind still hadn't fully begun to understand that Will was actually there and in his arms, and this sensation gave his brain a fresh jolt of unreality.

"I'm so relieved," Hannibal told Will honestly, "When I heard what had happened at the party, I was beside myself with worry. But why are you here?"

Will pulled back, his cheeks flushed and his eyes sparkling. He looked tired, but full of life.

"I didn't want them to drive me home," he said, "it would feel like they were tainting it, you know? But I wouldn't have them bring me to where the party was so I could get my car. Freddie Lounds and her ilk would be swarming over it to wait for me. I hoped I would be welcome here, and it's the only other place I could think to go."

Hannibal smiled warmly and raised a hand to Will's face. He kissed him lightly.

"Dear Will," he said, feeling his chest filled with warmth at the idea that Will had come to him when distressed, "you are always welcome in my home. Have you eaten? I was just preparing dinner."

Will grinned.

"I'm starved," he said, "They offered to get me food once, but only fast food filled with grease. I don't think I could have stomached it."

Hannibal kissed Will again, and led him to the kitchen. It would not be the food he had wanted to feed Will, the meat he had prepared for the night of the party, but there would still be time for that yet. Just having Will here tonight was enough for Hannibal.

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Will was tired. The initial rush, of standing on Hannibal's front step and seeing the man again after everything he had been put through, was wearing off. It had been nearly twenty four hours since Will had seen Hannibal, but longer since he had really slept. He had caught a few short naps between bouts of interrogation, but his rest had been poor and filled with vivid dreams.

Still, despite his exhaustion and hunger, Will was amazed by Hannibal's home and kitchen. Everything was ornate, bordering on ostentatious, but it didn't feel cold. It wasn't crowded with clutter as Will's own home was, but neither did it fall to minimalist, those empty houses Will detested for their feeling of false cleanliness and stark apathy. The house was exactly as he might have imagined for Hannibal, though he couldn't remember ever thinking about it in more than passing.

But the *kitchen* . Will wasn't sure he would have had the mental visual vocabulary to imagine it if he had tried. It was better than a kitchen at one of those fine dining restaurants, large and industrial, but it still felt warm. As if, of all the rooms in the house, this was the one Hannibal truly enjoyed his time in.

As Hannibal cooked, Will could tell it was. Hannibal was enjoying his activities, whether for being in the room or really just for the joy of creating beautiful and delicious food. Hannibal was smiling to himself as he worked, and frequently glanced up at Will. When he did, his entire face seemed to light up all over again, and his eyes would crinkle with his smile.

This was what it was like when Hannibal was in love.

It hit Will strangely, this realization. He hadn't really expected to have that word surface in his mind to describe Hannibal's feelings, though he had already tested the feel of it against his own. He hadn't been able to decide if it fit what he felt for Hannibal just yet, but now he had come to the sudden realization that it *was* the word for Hannibal.

"Do you have any dietary restrictions I should be aware of?" Hannibal asked.

Will huffed a soft laugh and shook his head.

"No allergies," he said, "I'll eat just about anything, and I-"

Will's train of thought cut off cleanly, falling into oblivion. An image had emerged through his constantly whirling and chattering thoughts. The red leather with his name pressed into it in silver. The notebook given to him by the killer.

He had left it on the table at the party.

"Will?" Hannibal asked, stopping his movements and looking at Will with concern etched into his features, "Is something the matter?"

Yes. *Everything was the matter* . Will had left his notebook in a public place. A place he couldn't go back to. A place crawling with reporters and obsessive fans. *His name* was on the damn notebook. There was no way it would still be there by this time.

Not only was it his notebook, and had an idea for what would probably be his next novel in it, but he had been given the notebook *by a killer* . If anyone had any idea, or found out, that would be disastrous.

"I just-" Will felt mildly dizzy, lightheaded, and he wasn't sure if it was from dehydration and hunger or from this new and terrible realization, "I left something at the party. When they arrested me, I didn't bring it. I left it on the table."

Hannibal furrowed his brow and tipped his head. He didn't understand.

"My notebook," Will said. The words burned him like acid on their way, and he felt ill.

Understanding dawned on Hannibal's features. He frowned and set down the knife he had been using.

"That is unfortunate," Hannibal said carefully, "by this time I doubt it is still there. I believe Alana cleaned up the party after you were taken from it. Perhaps she has it with the copies of the book from the table."

Will felt a glimmer of hope light in his chest. He hadn't realized *anyone* had cleaned it up. He hadn't expected anyone to do it, and if he had thought of it he was sure Alana wouldn't have even come to mind. He only really thought about Beverly and Hannibal for things like that.

In retrospect, he felt bad about that. As if Alana wasn't one of his friends.

"Do you think so?" Will asked, immediately reaching for his phone, which was out of battery.

Hannibal nodded, resuming his food preparations.

"I think it likely," Hannibal said, "though of course there is also a high probability it was taken by someone before she had the chance. At least we can rest assured no one will be able to read it."

Will swallowed hard, but nodded.

"Yeah," he said, sitting down at the kitchen table. He felt as if his head was in a guillotine, just waiting for the blade to drop. "It's just, the notebook was a gift, and I can't stand the thought of losing it."

Will decided that had been the wrong thing to say about half a second after he'd said it. He was just so tired, and now he was distressed because of this.

He didn't want to lose the notebook. Even if no one could read it. Even if they couldn't trace it back to the killer. Will didn't want to lose it. He wanted to keep it, and have it, and write in it.

He was such a broken person. Selfish and self-serving.

“I am sorry to hear that,” Hannibal said, his head down as he focused on his cooking, “I hope Alana has it, in that case, so you may get it back quickly. I imagine it will find its way back to you regardless, as no one can read it. When they discover this, surely they will find a way to return it.”

Will sighed and set his dead phone on the table, spinning it. He wanted to write something. He was itching to do something, but he was also hungry and tired.

“Maybe,” he said, “That’s happened before. But before, I wasn’t publicly suspected for a murder that was connected to my books. Not to mention, I bet it would fetch a fair price on a market. There are already people who would buy things like napkins famous people have used, and this is much more illicit. Freaks and codebreakers would love to get their hands on it alike. It will only come back to me if it’s in the hands of someone who has no interest in selling it or trying to decode what it says.”

Hannibal’s mouth twisted into a moue of displeasure. It was actually adorable, and Will felt some of his stress melt with the desire to stand up and pepper kisses onto those lips. He almost laughed aloud.

“I am sorry, Will,” Hannibal said, “I would not want this for you.”

Will smiled and shook his head. He just couldn’t stay upset when Hannibal was looking like that.

“Forget about it,” he said, waving his hand, “it’s really killing the mood.”

Hannibal smiled as well, picking up the two plates he had prepared and carrying them over to the table.

“I admit this is not how I had planned to share a meal with you in my home,” he confessed, setting one of the plates down in front of Will, “I had rather grand ideas, though this is somewhat more intimate.”

Will huffed a laugh. He could imagine Hannibal had planned a dinner with multiple courses, and would have them sit at a long dining table with all the fixings. It would have been almost overwhelmingly romantic, and Will would have died of nerves.

“I bet you did,” he said as Hannibal sat down with his own plate, “but I like this just fine. Especially for tonight.”

Hannibal smiled brilliantly, making Will’s heart skip in his chest. He was really so lost. Maybe it was something on the verge of becoming love.

Hannibal’s phone chimed, and he cast Will a slightly sheepish and apologetic glance as he checked it. When Hannibal saw whatever it was the notification showed, his smile returned and he showed it to Will.

It was a news briefing. From Jack Crawford of all people.

-Author Will Graham is no longer in police custody. There is no evidence to connect him with the recent murders other than the similarities between his fictional novels and the scenes the killer has been leaving. He was taken into custody in an attempt to both protect him (as the killer was most likely at the event he was attending) and to potentially elicit a reaction from the killer. Furthermore, FBI officials felt he may have had information he had yet to disclose, likely out of forgetfulness rather than malicious intent. Authorities are doing everything they can to track down the killer, and hope the public will view this as a poorly executed attempt to do the right thing.-

Will could see Catherine written all over this. If she had her way, Jack would have resigned by the end of the week. He would have to show her actual evidence against Will for her to pull any punches. If they really didn't have anything, she would have their hides.

Will grinned.

"That's a start, at least," he said, looking back up at Hannibal, "Catherine is going to make them regret they ever messed with me."

Hannibal nodded, something secretly satisfied shining in his eyes.

"They are trying to exonerate you and themselves simultaneously," Hannibal noted, "very careful not to take full blame, while admitting you are not certainly guilty."

Will chuffed and nodded.

"They aren't going to be able to fix the damage they've done. Until the real killer is caught, and even after that, there are going to be people who believe I am the killer. But at least they're trying. They've completely burned the bridge for me, though. Jack isn't going to get anything from me anymore, no matter what. He thinks I was bad before, but he doesn't know the half of it."

Hannibal's eyes danced with amusement and secret pleasure at Will's words. Will didn't fully understand the meaning of his expression, but he thought there might not be any rational explanation. Hannibal was in love with him.

"You are radiant, Will," Hannibal said.

Will flushed with pleasure.

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Hannibal felt exalted.

Will was beautiful. He was brilliant. He was volatile, and getting ever closer to the moment of ignition. He was exquisite.

Will showered before bed, having been put through quite an ordeal. He emerged looking clean, radiant, and good enough to eat, with a towel around his waist.

Will laughed, making Hannibal's stomach twist in a way that was not entirely unpleasant.

"You look as if you're about to eat me," he said.

Hannibal stood and prowled toward him, his heart pounding in his chest as he drew near to Will and could smell him.

"I am considering it," he replied lowly, and watched raptly as Will blushed down to his bare chest. It was entirely beguiling.

Will ducked his head, his dark curls bouncing. The water had accentuated the curl of his hair, and Hannibal wanted to bury his face in them. He wanted to sink his teeth into Will's flesh and tear him apart, but he also wanted to hold him so tightly the broken pieces of his self might fuze back together and heal. He wanted to plunder Will's mind and body, but he also wanted to spoil him with gentle affection and care.

"What a duality you have revealed in me," Hannibal murmured, and Will looked up at him again.

The moment Will's head was raised, Hannibal caught him in a kiss. Will let out a soft sound of surprised, but quickly opened up to the kiss, pulling closer and gripping at Hannibal's shoulder with one hand. The other held the towel that clung to his hips so tantalizingly. Hannibal set his own hands on Will's waist, feeling electricity rush up his arms at the sensation of bare skin under his fingers. He felt Will's flesh react to his touch, shivering slightly at the unfamiliar feeling before accepting it as Will leaned into him further.

Hannibal was hopelessly in love with Will Graham. It was into the territory of obsession, and Hannibal knew it all too well. That evening, hearing how upset the thought of losing the notebook had made Will, Hannibal had been absolutely enthralled. Will had been careful not to let on who he had gotten the notebook from, which filled Hannibal with satisfied adoration. Will was protecting someone he only thought of as a killer, jealously possessive over the gift he had been given. Hannibal still believed Will had handed over the letter, but he was glad to know Will was so pleased with the gift. The letter had truly been for the FBI, anyway. The notebook had been the real object of interest.

It was only a matter of time before Hannibal would convince Will to love the killer as well.

Will broke the kiss, panting slightly. His eyes were wide, and his pupils blown wide as he stared up at Hannibal with anxious anticipation.

“What kind of duality?” he asked, breathless.

Hannibal smiled and bit Will’s lip gently as he pulled them over toward the bed.

“You inspire me to be reckless, yet you are so precious to me I want to be gentle,” he admitted, lifting one hand and carding his fingers through Will’s damp curls. They were soft and silky between his fingers, and he relished the sensation.

Will smiled shyly and looked up at Hannibal through his eyelashes.

“You are always gentle with me, Doctor Lecter,” he said innocently, “but tonight is meant to be for new things.”

Hannibal’s hand tightened in Will’s hair, making him gasp lightly, but not in pain. Hannibal pulled Will’s head up and angled it so he could better do what he had wanted. He plundered Will’s mouth with wild abandon, though he held back still in many other ways. He would not lose control, he would only relinquish it bit by bit as he saw appropriate.

Will reacted well to that, arching into Hannibal and emitting another soft sound that Hannibal filed away for future consideration.

This version of Will seemed so different from any Hannibal had yet seen. He was meek and shy, nearly malleable. It was fascinating and enticing. It increased Hannibal’s desire to bite into him.

“Are you very tired?” Hannibal asked, pulling Will down onto the bed so he was nearly lying on top of Hannibal, one hand still stubbornly clutching at the towel as he blushed darker.

“I am never too tired for you,” Will replied, his eyelids low over those striking blues. He leaned forward and traced his nose along Hannibal’s jaw, the sensation soft and teasing. Hannibal was sure he would lose all restraint if that kept up.

Hannibal flipped them, tossing Will onto his back and surprising him enough he let go of that towel. Still, it stubbornly remained on Will’s body as if in defiance of Hannibal specifically.

Hannibal straddled Will’s hips and sat back on his heels, deciding he might as well even the playing field a bit. He pulled off his tie and began to undo the buttons of his shirt. He had removed his jacket and vest while Will had been in the shower, so he didn’t have all that far to go, relatively speaking.

Will propped himself up on his elbows, watching Hannibal intently. His eyes tracked the progress of Hannibal’s fingers, and curiously made him feel self-conscious. Never before had anyone made him feel that way, especially when he was in a position where he was getting exactly what he wanted.

What kind of magic did Will possess?

“You really are dangerous, Doctor Lecter,” Will said, his voice soft and smooth, the corners of his mouth tilted up in a coy smile.

Hannibal tipped his head, curious even through the anxious energy thrumming through his veins.

“Am I?” he asked.

Will shifted so he was sitting up, and he reached out to push Hannibal’s shirt off his shoulders. He stared at Hannibal’s bare chest and arms in a way that again left Hannibal feeling peculiarly exposed, and he wasn’t sure if it wasn’t entirely because of what Will had said.

“You hide behind those tailored suits and eccentric hobbies,” Will said, dropping the shirt onto the floor over the side of the bed. Hannibal didn’t even care. “But you could easily kill a man. You know how. You used to be a surgeon. You understand what makes people tick. And when you’re like this,” Will touched Hannibal’s arm, feather light, “you look like a predator.”

Hannibal felt as if his heart might stop dead in his chest. This was too much. Will was bold, but sweet, and clever, and stunning in the low light of the bedroom.

Will pulled Hannibal down suddenly, capturing him in a bruising kiss that left Hannibal’s mind whirling.

“Are you frightened of me?” Hannibal asked, his voice rough despite how he tried to control himself.

Will huffed a laugh and keened underneath Hannibal as they fell back onto the bed.

“No,” he gasped, “I love it.”

Will woke to the sounds and smells of Hannibal making breakfast. It was earlier than he would normally wake up, before his new set of alarms would begin for the day, but not too much. He stretched and swung his legs over the side of the bed.

He didn’t have a change of clothes to wear, but he had the sneaking suspicion Hannibal wouldn’t mind if he borrowed something.

The shirt he had thrown on the floor last night was no longer where he had left it, but it was hanging on the back of a chair nearby. Will huffed a soft laugh at the sight and walked over to it.

Hannibal had left it there for him. Hannibal wanted him to wear it, or else he would have taken it away to be laundered. Will was slowly getting to the point where he understood the motivations behind these little actions from Hannibal. He had been set back because of his sleep deprivation at their first meeting, then getting sick nearly immediately after, but he was catching up. He was sure he’d know Hannibal inside and out before too long.

That thought made his face heat with a flush, and he picked up the shirt and pressed his face into it. He took in a breath, smelling Hannibal's cologne leftover from the day before.

Will pulled the shirt on and began to button it up. It was big on him, predictably, because Hannibal had a larger frame despite their heights not being so different. As he dithered over whether or not to leave the top button undone, he heard his phone sound.

Looking around, Will saw his phone on the bedside table. It had been plugged in at some point, so it wasn't dead anymore. He didn't know when Hannibal had done that, but he smiled.

He had plenty of messages. Several from both Beverly and Catherine, and a few from Alana. Then, there were the notifications about what was going on in the news at the moment.

Aware he might regret it later, Will decided everything could wait until after breakfast. He was curious about Hannibal's home, and wanted to explore a bit before he ate. He didn't want to dampen his good mood by paying attention to the real world.

Will set his phone back down and left the bedroom.

He wanted to see Hannibal's library. He was sure there would be one, a house as big as this. If not, there would at least be bookshelves in a study or something of the sort. He wanted to see what kinds of books Hannibal liked, or at least what kind he read. He had a few ideas of what he would find, but it would be fun to see for sure.

Will looked around a bit, peeking in through doors while he avoided the kitchen. Hannibal might know he was up and about, but he didn't want to interrupt his cooking. At least not yet.

At last, Will found a room that had large bookshelves all along the walls. There was also a desk and a couch, and a few comfortable looking chairs. Will guessed it was a library that doubled as a study, though he wouldn't put it past Hannibal to have another room that was exclusively a study.

Will entered, leaving the door open so he wouldn't be difficult to find if Hannibal wanted to. He walked right over to one of the shelves and began to read titles, amused by what he found.

There were classics and foreign literature, surgical and psychological texts, and philosophy. It was all exactly what one would expect from someone like Hannibal. Will wondered if this was just another piece of the mask he seemed to wear for nearly everyone. The suit he had worked all his life to tailor perfectly, giving the impression he wanted and no more.

But this was his personal library, not the shelves in his office. Will knew there had to be something else here. Something that would give more insight into the man. He knew there would be. He just had to find it.

Will glanced around the room, trying to decide where to look next, and his eye caught on something. A few books that seemed familiar, grouped together on a shelf.

As he stepped closer, Will realized why he had gotten hung up on it. They were his books. An entire shelf dedicated to *Will's novels* .

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Hannibal had heard Will up and moving about. It pleased him that Will felt comfortable enough to explore his home, as Hannibal had already explored Will's of necessity.

Now breakfast was ready, Hannibal went in search of wherever Will had ended up. He had a fairly good idea of where that would be. Hannibal expected Will would naturally gravitate towards the library, both because of his curiosity and his profession.

Hannibal carried a tray of breakfast in that direction.

Sure enough, the library door was open, as if to show him where Will was. He smiled to himself as he approached.

In the doorway, Hannibal stopped, frozen in his tracks.

The sight of Will in nothing but Hannibal's shirt might have been enough to stun him alone, but Will was holding one of his own novels, standing by the shelf from which it came and fixing Hannibal in place with an intense expression.

"You've read my books," Will said.

It wasn't a question, yet it demanded an answer of Hannibal as if it was one.

Hannibal would have to tread carefully, now.

"Yes," he replied, stepping in and setting the tray on an end table, "I have never told you I haven't."

Will hummed in consideration, and Hannibal knew he was not off the hook yet.

While Will's expression was intense, it betrayed very little by way of Will's actual feelings on the subject. He didn't look angry, but Hannibal knew better than to assume that meant he wasn't.

"And I never asked," Will agreed thoughtfully, "Would you have told me the truth if I had?"

Hannibal walked over to Will, leaving breakfast for the moment.

"I believe I would have," Hannibal replied, taking the book from Will and sliding it back into place on the shelf, "though I would have been concerned how you would react."

Will frowned, staring at the row of spines with his name on them. Hannibal waited, curious to see how this ended and nervous despite himself.

"That's probably fair," Will said softly, more to himself than to Hannibal.

Will took down another of his books and flipped through it. Icarus Sky.

“You’ve read this one multiple times,” he said, glancing back up to Hannibal.

Hannibal smiled and nodded.

“It is my favorite so far,” he confessed, “I have read it more than any others.”

And oh, it felt like a confession. If Will only looked harder, he could see everything. From this one piece of information, he could put it together. Hannibal felt his pulse speed up, and he wondered how Will would react if this is how he learned the truth.

Will only returned the smile, closing the book and placing it back on the shelf.

“I’m glad,” he said, taking Hannibal’s hand, “most people don’t understand it. I could have guessed you would, and I’m pleased.”

Will kissed Hannibal, then, and Hannibal knew he hadn’t put it together yet. Hannibal was both relieved and disappointed by it. He was concerned about what Will might do, but he was also anxious for Will to know. Whatever Will’s reaction would be, Hannibal wanted to find out.

Hannibal pulled Will over to the couch and they began breakfast.

“You’ve already started reading Typhoid and Swans, haven’t you?” Will asked.

Again, he caught a glimpse of some very fast decision in Hannibal’s eyes. As if Hannibal were considering whether or not to tell the truth, and every variable occurred to him in less than a moment. It was fascinating, and Will knew it meant he was testing Hannibal. Hannibal had not prepared himself to answer these questions, so he had to decide very quickly what he would say. Will hoped he would lean towards honesty.

“I have,” Hannibal admitted, and Will smiled.

“Have you already figured out what I took from you in order to write it?” he asked.

Amusement passed over Hannibal’s features, as if there was something particularly funny about how Will had phrased the question.

“There are many clear similarities between myself and the psychiatrist in the novel,” he said, “but I should hope the way you describe him is not what you truly think of me.

Will laughed. He hadn’t expected Hannibal to read it, so he hadn’t even thought about how that would look to him. It was funny, because he had described the character as having an artificial charm, the way psychopaths often did. He would not have used the phrase to describe Hannibal, because while some of his charm felt less than genuine, upon first meeting, Will thought it was simply in order for there to be a trial period for him to decide which parts of himself were safe to disclose. Will didn’t see anything wrong with that, and wouldn’t have mocked Hannibal for it. He did almost the exact same thing, though he knew more quickly what he could show.

“No, of course not,” Will assured him, “You are far more elegant, and even when you tailor your behavior for someone, you are still yourself. You don’t pretend to be someone you’re not.”

Hannibal seemed pleased with that, and they continued on with their breakfast.

“When did you first realize I was the one who wrote them?” Will asked, “I mean, Will Graham isn’t exactly an exotic name, and the picture on the inside cover doesn’t look all that much like me.”

Hannibal considered that for a moment. Will thought he might be considering a lie again, and he wondered what Hannibal wanted to accomplish. If a lie was an option, it had to have a goal.

“I thought you might be when I heard you on the phone,” Hannibal said slowly, “and when I saw you I was nearly convinced. It was when you began talking that I really allowed myself to believe.”

Will thought about that, and remembered something. Something they had already discussed, before this recent development.

“You were there, at the library that day,” he said, “did you really just happen to be there?”

Hannibal at least had the decency to look a bit sheepish.

“I had heard you might be there,” he confessed, “but I had no desire to make myself an annoyance. I only went so I might see your face.”

Will felt his face flush, and huffed a laugh.

So, he had gotten it right when he thought the strange man in the suit was something like a stalker. It was funny, that Hannibal had been there to see him, and Will had noticed him. It was funny, because of where they were now, and how it had all begun. The world was like some strange plot that Will wouldn’t be able to make believable if he wrote it.

That was how reality was most of the time, though. Things happened that were called miracles, and people had to believe them because it was real. They wouldn’t have swallowed it if someone like Will had tried to spoon it into their mouths, though.

“You are not angry with me,” Hannibal said tentatively, as if he had been very worried about just that.

Will shrugged and shook his head.

“No. I was just surprised. I’m not angry, because you didn’t actually lie to me. You just sort of hid the truth. A sin of omission. Which I can forgive much easier than outright lies. I’m not angry, because it was never really about whether or not you had read my books. It was about being able to talk to you about something other than them. I usually end up talking about my books with people I meet, because they only want to talk to me if they can talk about what I’ve written. It’s exhausting, and I just wanted someone to talk to who wouldn’t

always bring things back around to my books. You did that, and I guess I assumed it was because you hadn't read them, but clearly it wasn't. I still feel the same way about you, or I actually respect you a bit more, since you managed to keep from talking to me about the books despite how much you clearly enjoy them."

Hannibal's face lit up in a way Will thought he had never seen before. The man was practically glowing. It filled Will with some deep satisfaction that he had put that expression on Hannibal's face, though he wasn't sure he was ready to examine that quite yet.

There was something strange, niggling at the back of Will's mind. It had something to do with the books, and with the killings. It was trying to break through his thoughts and become clear, but he was shoving it away so he could just have this morning with Hannibal. He didn't want to ruin a good thing so soon. The world was likely to do that all on its own, and he refused to help it along.

"I confess I was afraid of how you might react when you found out," Hannibal said, "because I never sought to correct you when you assumed I had not read them. I was intentionally misleading you, and it feels as if it was a kind of betrayal."

Will smiled wickedly.

"Oh, I'm upset with you," he said, "don't think I'm not. The problem is that I've already forgiven you, so it's hard for me to want to make you sorry for it."

Will sighed and laid his head on the back of the couch. His hair fell away from his face, and he smiled wryly to himself.

"It's a stupidly double edged sword, this," he said, "I'm upset that you kept it from me, intentionally led me to believe you hadn't read them, but I'm so damn interested in hearing your thoughts on some things that I can't find the energy in me to be really angry about it."

Will could feel Hannibal's smile, even though he couldn't see it with his head back like that. The smile was so warm it was like having a kerosene lamp sitting next to him. It was like sitting in a ray of sun. It was strange how pleasant the feeling was. Will hadn't ever had someone he felt that from.

Hannibal's hand reached up and began to card through Will's hair. It nearly made Will drop his jaw because of how good it felt. It was like all the stress in his body was being drawn out of him through Hannibal's fingertips on his scalp.

Will imagined leaches, but instead of drinking his blood they pulled out the negative things, just as those healers from so long ago believed they did. He imagined them, growing engorged on all the horrors that filled his mind, the nightmares and neglect he put himself through. He wondered if they would burst, and drench him in those things once more.

"What are you smiling about?" Hannibal asked, his voice soft and curious.

Will turned his head to look at Hannibal.

He laughed.

“Just thinking of leeches,” he said.

The look of bewilderment on Hannibal’s face earned another laugh. Everything was just so absurd.

Will’s laugh cut off short when he remembered the notebook, and he lifted his head.

His phone. He needed to get to his phone. Alana had tried to call him last night, while it was dead. She might have his notebook. He needed to call her and find out if she had the notebook.

The notebook. Notebook. Notebook.

His mind was chanting, making it hard for him to think of anything else, even as Hannibal grew concerned beside him on the couch.

“Will, is something the matter?” Hannibal asked, echoing his words from the night before, when Will’s mind had first made the connection that he had lost the notebook.

“I hope not,” Will said, shaking himself and trying to dislodge the unnerving repetition, “I just think I need to call Alana and ask her about the notebook.”

Hannibal smiled and nodded. He seemed happy, and Will was too. Will could think of only one thing that could make him happier this morning.

If he had that notebook.

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Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Will got his phone and Hannibal gave him some more clothes to put on. Hannibal would have been satisfied for Will to remain in only his shirt, but Will insisted he wouldn't be comfortable talking on the phone unless he was dressed.

Hannibal cleaned up breakfast, and Will sat at the counter as he was getting ready to call Alana.

Will sat up straighter, and Hannibal guessed that was the moment when Alana answered the phone.

"Hello? Yes, Alana. Yeah, it's Will. I'm really fine."

There was a pause.

"No, I'm fine, I promise. I just wanted to ask-"

Will stopped, apparently interrupted. He listened, and his expression grew sour. Hannibal wondered what Alana might be saying to him to make him look that way. Whatever it was, he wished she wouldn't. He much preferred Will when he was happy, especially just this morning.

"As it so happens, yes," Will said curtly, "but I don't see what that has to do with-"

Again, he was cut off, and this time his expression didn't turn so much as it darkened. He was nearly thundering.

"That may be true, but it has no bearing on my decisions. Much less Hannibal's. Do you really not trust either of us to make our own choices? I can understand you questioning me, because you've never really trusted my judgment, have you. But Hannibal? I thought you respected him, if nothing else."

Hannibal could hear Alana as she replied, her voice louder and coming through in a muffled and distorted sound. She was upset.

"Alana," Will said sharply, cutting her off and apparently done following her lead in the conversation, "I called to ask you something important. Listen to me."

Will paused, and Hannibal didn't hear Alana say anything. Will's expression lightened a bit.

"Good. I hear you picked up my things after the big to do at the party. There was something on my table, with the stacks of books. Something I would really like to have as soon as possible. I need to know if you have it."

Will paused again, allowing Alana to decide whether or not to cooperate. He seemed satisfied that she would.

“It’s a notebook. You know how I always have a notebook with me. This one was nice. It was dark red, and it had my name printed into the cover in silver.”

Will listened again, as Alana presumably checked to see if she had the notebook with Will’s other things. It was quite a bit longer of a pause than the previous ones had been, and Hannibal found himself anxious to know nearly as much as Will.

Will tapped his fingers nervously on the countertop as he waited. It was quite a long pause, and Hannibal wondered if that was a good sign or not.

At length, Hannibal heard Alana’s voice return, and Will’s expression fell. Hannibal knew what the verdict had been before Will said anything in response.

“Okay, thank you for looking,” Will said, then listened, “no, it’s fine. Thank you. I’m sure it’ll turn up. At least-”

It seemed Alana was making a habit of interrupting Will this morning, cutting him off even now. Will closed his eyes and clenched his hand into a fist on top of the counter as he listened to whatever it was Alana had to say.

“I appreciate your concern, even as unsolicited and unnecessary as it is,” Will said coldly, “but I can assure you we are both fine and entirely sane. Goodbye, Alana.”

Will ended the call and set his phone on the counter with a sound of disgust.

“I gather the notebook was not to be found,” Hannibal ventured, knowing better than to ask about what Alana had been saying just at the end.

Will sighed and shook his head.

“She remembered seeing it when I was holding it, but she said it wasn’t on the desk. She looked, but she doesn’t have it. Someone must have taken it.”

Will ran a hand over his face, then sliding it up into his hair with a sigh of exasperation.

“But do you want to know the damndest thing about our talk just now?” he asked.

Hannibal did not answer, but he tipped his head curiously. He had some idea of what it might be, based on what Will had said, but he didn’t want to interrupt Will’s verbal rhythm.

“The first thing she asked when she answered was if I’m sleeping with you.”

Will’s face flushed and he laughed bitterly. Hannibal suppressed a self-satisfied smile, knowing that wasn’t the appropriate response for the moment.

“She thinks it’s unethical, because we met in a doctor-patient setting,” Will continued, “she tried to argue that I’ve clearly blurred the lines of what’s appropriate, because I was in a bad

place, mentally, and you brought me out of it. She thinks this is all some kind of misunderstanding. As if it's all *my* fault, and you're the victim."

That did upset Hannibal. If anything, *he* should have been the one on the receiving end of Alana's ire, because he was the doctor in the dynamic. It would be his fault if anything inappropriate were happening, not Will's. Alana should have suspected him of manipulating Will into developing feelings for him.

There must have been something she thought she knew about Will that made her believe he was less mentally stable than Hannibal believed him to be. That, in combination with her respect for Hannibal, skewed her view so much she completely misinterpreted what had transpired.

"Perhaps I should talk to her," Hannibal mused, "and convince her I have not been taken advantage of."

Will snorted a laugh, his expression still sour.

"I can't imagine anyone has *ever* been able to take advantage of you," he said, "but maybe you should. You can probably keep your temper better than I can, at least at the moment. I have too many things grating on my nerves to have patience for this kind of thing. It would be *kinder* to have you talk to her."

Hannibal smiled and walked around the counter, pulling Will into a soft kiss. It sent him reeling once more that he could do this, now. Will was his.

Will was his, and he didn't have to hide his desire anymore. He could take and claim as he wanted, so far as he didn't frighten Will away. And he was already making marked progress in convincing Will to embrace the other side of him as well. Soon, there would be no secrets between them, and Will would be truly and only his.

Will hummed pleasantly, his eyes closed as if he were savoring the moment. He was beautiful.

"The way things are, you'd think it's more likely you're the one taking advantage of me," he said, echoing Hannibal's thoughts from just a moment ago. It was stunning, the way Will thought. "You're the tall, handsome, mentally stable one out of the two of us. I was in a vulnerable position when I came to you. And, now I know you've read my books, it's the kind of thing that could be construed as unethical, Doctor. You could have been manipulating me this whole time, just to get us right here."

Hannibal tipped his head, bumping their noses together and making Will open his eyes. Will was smiling. It wasn't a true accusation. Will didn't seem concerned about it at all. It had all just been an amusing mental exercise, looking at things from other perspectives to entertain that brilliant imagination.

"I would have to be an incredibly adept manipulator," Hannibal said, giving Will his own smile, "to get past your incredible perception. You have always seen me so clearly, I cannot imagine being able to hide."

Will huffed a laugh and kissed Hannibal again. His hand snaked up and gripped Hannibal's tie, holding him in place. Will's lashes fluttered over his pale cheeks, and his lips ghosted over Hannibal's as he spoke.

"I think you could manage," he said, his voice so soft the words were barely audible, "you're quite the psychiatrist, and we both know you are dangerous. I just wonder if you want to be dangerous to me."

Hannibal's heart was pounding in his chest, just under where Will's knuckles rested against it. He thought it entirely likely Will could feel it through his shirt, and he wondered what Will thought of it.

Will was becoming more dangerous, himself. Hannibal could see Will growing ever closer to being really and truly dangerous to him. He was coming close to understanding everything. Hannibal thought it possible the only thing keeping him from the realization was some internal defense mechanism. Will didn't want to know, so he didn't.

But that wouldn't last long. Hannibal could see it. Even now, the walls were crumbling, those barriers to protect Will from this dangerous knowledge. Will would soon be left with nothing to do but understand.

Hannibal was anxious to see Will when he had that understanding.

"I have no desire to cause you any harm," Hannibal replied, matching his tone to Will's, "though I admit you are beautiful in your suffering."

Will gasped softly, then pulled on Hannibal's tie to close that tiny gap between them. Pressing their lips together again.

That Will reacted this way when Hannibal said it caused his heart to leap in his chest. It had been one of those things that had been a gamble to say, never knowing exactly how Will would react. Will had the uncanny ability to surprise him, and he adored that part of him. Saying it had been a gamble, because it surely brought Will closer to understanding, and Hannibal had no way of knowing how Will would react when he found out.

That gamble had caused Will to pull closer to Hannibal, rather than away. He was not frightened by Hannibal, even in the same breath as he stated Hannibal was dangerous.

Will had claimed he loved it.

Chapter End Notes

Okay, so I'm having a lot of fun messing with things in this story. Oh, how much fun I'm having. That might not be reassuring to you all, but this fic is a hoot. XD
I hope you're enjoying it at least half as much as I am. <3

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Next on the list was Beverly. Will had to call her and find out exactly what kind of chaos had been going on during his brief radio silence.

She answered on the second ring, and Will could tell she was in the lab. A busy lab. Something was going on.

“Will, thank God. I’ve been trying to get ahold of you. What’s going on?”

Will huffed a laugh, but his stomach was twisting painfully. She sounded extremely upset.

“I’m at Hannibal’s,” he said.

Where this would usually have earned an excited squeal, and taken precedence over everything else in their busy schedules, all Will got was an exasperated sigh.

“I’m glad you’re somewhere safe, and with someone who cares about you,” Beverly said, sounding tired rather than thrilled, “at least I know you’re not alone. Alana called me to ask if you were *with* Hannibal. I told her she’d have to ask you. I’ve had enough on my plate, and I wasn’t about to get her going at me about ethics and propriety. I’m sorry if that means she’s going after you now, but I don’t have the energy to care at the moment.”

Will’s heart ached with how tired and unhappy Beverly sounded. It was clear Jack was working her too hard, and Will knew her friendship with him hadn’t done her any favors recently. If Jack couldn’t get to him, he might have been taking out his frustration on Beverly instead. There would be anger, later, but for now he just felt sad.

“Bev, I don’t know what to say. I wish I could make this all better somehow. I just don’t have-”

“Stop,” Beverly said, pained, “I didn’t want to talk to you so you could apologize for things that are out of your control. I needed to tell you something. I can’t really talk to you anymore. Not until all of this is cleared up. It’s dubious already, my working on this case when you’re so involved. I just need to keep you at a distance for a bit while Jack cools down. I’m so sorry.”

Will didn’t know what to say. His tongue felt stuck to the back of his teeth, which were clenched together. He couldn’t say anything.

“You don’t have to say anything,” Beverly said, a sigh in her words, “and you probably can’t even think of anything to say. It’s probably better that way, because it’ll only make me feel worse if you said something. I’m just sorry, and I wish it wasn’t like this right now. See you later.”

The call ended, and Will was left looking at his phone despondently.

He had lost Beverly. Not from anything he had done, but because he was tied up in something.

Will set the phone on the counter and frowned. His mind was peculiarly blank, no ideas or thoughts whirling around, clamoring for his attention. He wondered if this was actual shock, what he was experiencing.

“Will?” Hannibal asked, walking around the counter as he dried his hands on a hand towel, “are you alright? What did miss Katz have to say?”

Will looked up at him, and there must have been something in his face that showed Hannibal something wasn’t right. Hannibal frowned and stepped up to Will, his brow creasing with concern.

“Will, you are pale,” he stated, “what happened?”

Will swallowed, his throat feeling tight and unpleasant.

“Beverly can’t talk to me anymore,” he said, then laughed. It came out choked and hysterical, like he was losing his mind. “Big bad Jack doesn’t want her hanging out with a delinquent like me. I’m a bad influence, and it doesn’t look good.”

Hannibal pulled Will into a tight embrace, and the feeling brought the flood of Will’s thoughts back to him. It was both a relief and a pain. Thinking was painful, but it was something so normal Will found some solace in its return.

“She’s the only person I’ve known for a long time,” Will confided, “I’ve never been good at keeping in touch with people. Never kept friends. Bev’s the only one who stuck. She’s the only thing that stuck around all these years. My only constant. And now she’s gone.”

Hannibal’s hand carded through Will’s hair in a soothing motion.

“I am so sorry, Will,” Hannibal said gently, “Life is being cruel to you. I would that I could relieve it.”

Will sighed and pressed his face into Hannibal’s shoulder.

He wasn’t happy about any of this. The world really was being cruel, in most of the ways it was possible to be. But there was one good thing for him. Hannibal was here. That was what he could cling to, at least for the moment.

“I should call Catherine,” he said, smiling bitterly, “see if she has yet more bad news for me. Get it all over so I can lick my wounds.”

Hannibal pressed a kiss to Will’s temple.

“You are strong, Will,” he said, “this will not break you.”

Will pulled away and nodded. He wasn’t entirely sure about that, but he was grateful to Hannibal for his faith. It might be enough to keep him going.

“Not yet, at least,” he said, picking up his phone, “and I guess we won’t know until I do it.”

Will dialed his lawyer.

Catherine was an angel, as far as Will was concerned. She was already on track to sue Jack’s department, though she mentioned it would go more smoothly if they found the real killer. For the time being, Will was still technically a suspect.

Because Catherine was getting to know Will, she hadn’t held back much in bad-mouthing Jack and the way he had been operating.

But the most important thing she had been able to tell him was why they had felt secure enough in their conviction to jump the gun the way they had.

There actually had been evidence.

There had been a copy of Will’s book at the crime scene. Grotesque But Useful. A signed copy had been left directly under the dangling feet of the dead girl. It had Will’s fingerprints on it, and none others they could find. Not to mention, his name, in his own handwriting.

But that was stupid. If he had signed it, of course his fingerprints had been on it. It was more suspicious that no one else’s had been, because at least the person he had signed it for should have touched it, and more likely than not Beverly had as well. Those were only the people he knew of, and there should have been others.

Catherine had said there was also a personalized message with the signature, but they wouldn’t tell her what it said because they didn’t want the press getting wind of it.

Will liked Catherine a lot, and he was glad Beverly had sent him to her. Will couldn’t imagine how it would have gone if he had been left to his own devices this entire time.

“Will, you probably know this by now, but things are only going to get worse before they get better,” She had told him, “I wish it wasn’t like that, but you and I both know better than to expect more.”

Will did know better. His books often pointed out the truly terrible way the world works, and shows how they can create a living Hell for anyone unlucky enough to be caught up in it. The thing about Will’s imagination was that it gave him the ability to see every bad possibility. People like him usually suffered from anxiety, because there were so many unpleasant possibilities it flooded out the good ones.

Catherine seemed to have everything well in hand, so there was at least one thing Will didn’t have to worry about. It was only a small mercy, considering everything else going on in his life at the moment. He still had plenty to worry about.

Hannibal should not have been pleased with this recent development with Beverly Katz. It was terrible, and was causing Will even more pain than he had already been put through. She was his dearest friend, and she had been taken away, however temporarily.

Knowing this, Hannibal still felt a deep satisfaction. He was the only one left in Will's life. Beverly had been taken, Alana had just cut herself out, and Will had no one else. He didn't have anyone who wasn't Hannibal.

And that was very good news for Hannibal. It made things look all the easier for him, and what he hoped to accomplish in the near future.

Will really was his, and only his. At least for a while.

"Would you like me to help you retrieve your car?" Hannibal asked, handing Will a cup of coffee, prepared exactly as Will liked it.

Will sighed and stared down into the mug. His gaze was distant, as if looking through the mug at something far away.

"I think we're going to have to be a bit creative about how we do that," he said, sounding tired, "if anything, Freddie's still there at least, waiting for me to show up so she can ambush me. If I go, I have to not look like myself, or find a way to get past her. I'm almost tempted to say it isn't worth it at all."

Hannibal huffed a soft laugh. Will was right. Freddie Lounds would be waiting for him to appear, and Hannibal didn't think Will was in the best place to be dealing with her at the moment.

So they had to come up with a plan.

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“Doctor Lecter,” Freddie called, all but sprinting up to him.

Hannibal held out his hands in a warding off gesture, giving her a clear view of Will’s keychain in his hand.

“Excuse me, Miss Lounds,” he said, “I am only here to retrieve a car.”

Freddie stepped in his way, purposefully cutting him off from where Will’s car was parked. Her eyes were fixed on the keys in his hand, bright and curious.

“Will Graham’s car?” she asked, “is it true that you and he are romantically involved? Is he staying with you?”

Hannibal smiled politely, but did not answer any of her questions. He simply stopped, standing there facing her and holding her gaze.

“Will is a very good friend of mine,” he said.

Freddie was unperturbed, and she pressed on.

“What do you have to say on his recent arrest? Is he involved in the murders?”

Hannibal stepped aside and managed to get around her.

“Agent Jack Crawford has made a statement on the matter,” he said, walking towards the end of the parking lot away from Will’s car. She didn’t notice he was headed the wrong way, simply set out to stop him. “I have nothing to add at this point.”

Freddie cut in front of him again, blocking his way. There were a few other people with notebooks or recorders, drawing closer as they realized Hannibal was involved in the story they were trying to get. They were all converging on Hannibal and Freddie, and Hannibal had to fight a smile as he saw the plan working.

“That sounds like something a lawyer would say,” Freddie said, desperate for anything she could use, “have you spoken to a lawyer about this?”

Hannibal was now blocked by a growing group of people, each one hoping to get the tidbit that would boost ratings for their story. He saw movement in the corner of his eye, and knew Will was on the move. He had to ensure their attention remained on him.

“Speaking with a lawyer is not a sign of guilt,” he said calmly, then pointedly to Freddie, “of else you would have reason to be concerned, Miss Lounds, after that debacle in August.”

Immediately, attention shifted to Freddie, the desire for something juicy overriding the need for something relevant to the murders. He had managed to surprise her, he saw. She didn’t

know how to react or respond to what he had just said. The others seemed to notice as well, turning and starting to ask her questions, becoming further distracted from their original goal.

Hannibal saw the lights of Will's car flash on as his engine started. They were nearly finished.

"Aren't you concerned about the rumors about you being involved with a murder suspect?" Freddie asked, desperately trying to bring them back to the matter at hand.

Hannibal smiled politely.

"No, I am not," he said, and turned to head back to his own car.

Again, this seemed to catch Freddie by surprise.

"Aren't you here to get Will Graham's car?" she called after him.

Hannibal turned to smile at her.

"I apologize for the misunderstanding. I came in order to retrieve a car. You may notice that Will's car is no longer here. Good day, Miss Lounds."

It was deeply satisfying to see the flash of confusion on her face as Hannibal turned back toward his own car, and then to hear the chaos that ensued when they all looked around and saw he was right. They had been relying on that car to lure Will into their hands, and they had all let him slip by. Hannibal was pleased that everything had gone to plan.

Will laughed all the way home. He had seen the way the reporters had flocked to Hannibal, and how he had kept them on the hook. Will thought Hannibal would make a good fisherman, though he doubted Hannibal would be interested in it.

No, Hannibal was a fisher of men.

That thought only exacerbated Will's laughing fit. For some reason, thinking of Hannibal in any warm, religious context seemed wrong. Absurdly wrong.

Maybe it was because of how his eyes looked like blood in low light, gold in bright light, and black in the moonlight. Anyone with eyes like that couldn't be from God, or really associated with him.

Will's laughing slowed to a stop as he pulled up in front of his house. He was thinking about the way Hannibal had looked, prowling toward him in the bedroom. He really had looked like he could have eaten Will, just then. His gaze had been so dark and intense, consuming Will entirely by looking alone.

Will felt warm and pleased just thinking about it.

Hannibal had been holding back, though. Will had known it from the start. As if Hannibal were afraid of breaking Will or frightening him. It had made Will insatiably curious. He wondered what Hannibal would be like when he was no longer so reserved.

Perhaps it was because of how new it was, this thing between them.

Will wanted to ask, or bring it up just so they would both be aware of each other in this way. He just wasn't sure what the polite protocol would be for such a conversation. He didn't know if there *was* a polite protocol. And he couldn't talk to Beverly about it, either. She had always been the social authority in his life.

Will walked up the steps of his porch, and he noticed something.

The latch of the window was broken, and the frame had been either damaged or warped. The weather could be to blame. There was a gap between the window and the sill, and it would be letting in drafts if he didn't do anything about it.

Will stood and looked at it for a minute or so, mentally cataloging what he would need in order to fix it. He thought he had everything he needed, and there was no time like the present.

So Will entered the house and gathered the supplies he would need for the repair.

Hannibal pulled up to Will's house and smiled in curious wonder at what he saw.

Will had changed into a white T-shirt and jeans, and he was stretched out on the porch under the window. There was a toolbox and a few scattered kinds of supplies on the porch next to him, and an old radio with an antenna pouring out classic rock and roll music. Will seemed to be making some kind of repair on the window.

Will didn't seem to have noticed Hannibal, absorbed as he was in his task. As Hannibal stepped out of his car, he realized Will was singing along to the music.

Will's voice was not extraordinary, but it was pleasant, rich and slightly graveled in a way that made it sound somehow sensuous. The sheer intimacy of hearing it when Will thought himself alone struck Hannibal deeply. He would not have expected such a situation to occur, yet he was inordinately pleased.

Just as Hannibal was debating the best way to make his presence known, Will glanced up and saw him.

"Hannibal," He said, sitting up quickly and reaching towards the radio, "God. Sorry. I didn't know when you were coming, and I saw the window needed to be fixed-" Will was fumbling to turn off the radio, managing to knock it over and turn the volume up before it finally switched off, "-I just thought I'd have time. I'm sorry about this."

Will was flushed with embarrassment, and Hannibal only smiled as he stepped up on to the porch.

“No need to apologize,” he said, “You are quite stunning.”

Will’s blush darkened, and he moved the radio so it sat against the wall of the house. Out of the way and out of danger.

“Do you mind if I finish this before I head in?” he asked.

“Is there anything I can do to help?” Hannibal offered.

Will glanced up, his expression almost comically doubtful. It made Hannibal huff a laugh.

“I am not entirely incapable, Will,” Hannibal said with a smile.

Will coughed in surprise.

“No. I mean, that’s not- I didn’t. It’s just-” he sputtered, “I didn’t mean to imply I consider you incapable. You just don’t strike me as the home repair type.”

Hannibal sat in one of the chairs on the porch, watching as Will squirmed uncomfortably at the idea he had insulted Hannibal.

“I do not strike you as the home repair type, just as I didn’t strike you as the housekeeping type. I’m pleased to be able to surprise you at times, as you surprise me constantly.”

Will huffed and got back to work, likely an excuse to avoid eye contact now that he was uncomfortable.

“Your person suit is meant to hide those aspects of yourself,” Will said, dredging up those words he had used to describe Hannibal while he had been feverish, “I might see more than most people, but there are some things I just haven’t taken the time to consider. I didn’t really think it’d be relevant to me whether or not you do home repairs like this.”

Hannibal was amused. On top of that, the way Will was stretched out as he worked, and his capable hands moved deftly with his tools made Hannibal feel warm and distracted. He wanted very badly to take Will inside and show him how much he appreciated him.

But he would wait until Will was done. There would be no point in leaving the job unfinished, though it was a tempting idea.

“Does my person suit conceal these things from you, or is it simply that you have not lifted the veil to see them?” Hannibal asked.

Will glanced at him, his eyes sparkling with his own amusement, and something secret.

“It’s rude to peek,” Will said, “I don’t want to look if there are things you don’t want me to see. I know how you feel about impoliteness.”

Hannibal grinned. He knew this wasn’t the only reason Will didn’t tear away the veil to see Hannibal entirely. Will was afraid of what he would see. But he was brilliant in his attempted deception.

“I appreciate the consideration,” Hannibal told him, “though I’m sure I’d allow you to see whatever you wished of me.”

Will huffed a laugh, a bit of color returning to his cheeks.

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Will stood up when he was finished, wiping his hands off on his jeans and leaving streaks of dirt and dust behind. He was dirty, and sweaty, and probably needed a shower.

Hannibal was looking at him in that way again. Like he might just decide to eat him.

Hannibal stood as Will opened the door, and they went inside. He felt warm and jittery, not sure exactly what to expect from Hannibal just now. Hannibal's attention was always intense, but it had become more so since Will had shown up on his doorstep. Now, it was like circling a bonfire, and feeling the heat radiating off it.

"I think I should shower," Will said, moving into the kitchen, "I got myself all grimy fixing that window. Do you want something to drink?"

And Hannibal was there, right at Will's shoulder. He moved like a ghost, silent and eerily quick.

Hannibal leaned in and inhaled by Will's neck, making Will shiver involuntarily. Hannibal was smelling him. He was gross and dirty, and Hannibal was smelling him. In some way, for some reason, Will liked it.

"You need not shower on my account," Hannibal said lowly, pressing closer so his nose was in Will's hair, "I'm satisfied with your company just as you are."

Will turned and met Hannibal's lips, wondering if there was something wrong with him for finding these weird things Hannibal said and did so attractive. Certainly, most other people would find them off putting and even repulsive. But Hannibal made it all seem exactly like what Will should want.

"You like the smell of dirt and sweat on me?" he asked sarcastically when he pulled away, and Hannibal smiled.

"It is certainly an improvement on whatever aftershave I have smelled on you before," he replied.

Will huffed a laugh and shook his head.

"I bet you could just about tell me what brand it is, couldn't you?" Will asked, testing Hannibal a bit. He thought Hannibal's sense of smell was acute, had noticed the way he tipped his head to catch scents on the air, and he wanted to see how far that extended.

Hannibal smiled knowingly, possibly aware it was a test.

"Something left too long in the bottle," he said, still very close and speaking softly, "I imagine it wears a picture of a ship."

Will rolled his eyes.

“Can you convince me you didn’t just go through my cupboards while I was sick, Doctor?” he asked, wanting to pull Hannibal closer, but suddenly nervous about exactly how new this was. He wasn’t sure exactly how he could act.

Hannibal placed his hands on Will’s hips and pulled them together instead, saving Will from dithering over doing it himself. Hannibal traced his nose along Will’s jaw, closing his eyes as if savoring the scents.

“That would be rude of me,” he said, “and you know how I feel about discourtesy.”

Will huffed a laugh, but he felt like Hannibal was hiding something. For one thing, he knew Hannibal had gone through the cupboards enough to cook, and hadn’t seemed at all hesitant to look for fresh sheets. But he was now implying he wouldn’t look through Will’s things.

It made Will wonder what other things Hannibal might feel comfortable hiding.

Will pushed Hannibal away gently, shaking his head. He pulled out the bottle of wine he had bought, in the event of Hannibal coming over.

“I’m going to take a shower,” he repeated, “You’re welcome to have a drink.”

Hannibal accepted the bottle and studied it curiously, his eyes sparkling.

“You bought this for me,” he stated, his voice soft and pleased.

Will headed down the hall, smiling to himself.

“Had to have something to please you,” he called back over his shoulder, “Make yourself at home.”

Will knew Hannibal would. Hannibal hadn’t shown any qualms to being in Will’s space. If anything, Will thought he liked it quite a bit. Hannibal had some peculiar tendencies.

Hannibal mused over the wine as he searched the kitchen for a proper glass. He was pleased to find a pair of wine glasses that looked as if they had never been used.

Will had done this for him. There was no other reasoning he could think of that Will would have these things. Hannibal was inclined to believe Will did not change his habits for anyone but himself. He had only begun to eat and sleep better because he believed it would be good for him. Beverly had claimed it had been because Will liked Hannibal, but Hannibal thought it was more due to his internalized independence.

But Will was changing for Hannibal, now. These were small things, nothing that would normally have been seen as strange. But because it was Will, it really meant something.

Hannibal opened the wine and set it to breathe. He would pour them each a glass when Will got out of the shower.

Hannibal wandered around, taking in the spaces where Will spent most of his time. He hadn't properly done so when Will had been ill, all his searching borne of necessity.

There had been something off about Will just before he went to shower. As if he were debating whether or not to say something. The way he had looked at Hannibal had been more questioning as opposed to his usual intense scrutiny. It was likely no one else would have noticed, but Hannibal had been dedicating his life recently to learning every nuance of Will Graham.

Was it possible Will was allowing himself to begin understanding? Was he questioning if Hannibal could be the killer?

Regardless, Hannibal decided he would create another scene very soon. It would give Will the confirmation he needed. Then they could work through the aftermath.

Hannibal stopped in surprise, then smiled fondly when he saw Will's writing desk.

Where his laptop usually sat, turned off and waiting to be of use, sat an old Remington typewriter. It was a classic model, all metal and no plastic, looking like a relic of a time long past. There was a small stack of pages sitting beside it, each filled with neat lines of type.

It was interesting to imagine Will, sitting at the old machine, working on some project or other.

Hannibal picked up the top page, careful to hold it by the edges in case the ink might smudge. He read it, fascinated by the tale he was thrust into, of a man creating angels of his victims, setting them to pray over him while he slept feverishly.

Hannibal could see it, Will's words weaving a tapestry that felt more vivid and real than his true reality. He could feel the heat of the morning sun as the killer woke, smell the acidic scent of the vomit he had left on the bedside table, and hear the soft sounds of a city early in the day outside the motel.

Hannibal tore himself free of the story, knowing he couldn't read more or he would get stuck in that world. Then, Will might find him there, reading an unfinished work. Hannibal knew Will didn't like anyone to read his stories before they were finished.

It was still greatly tempting.

Hannibal placed the paper back on the top of the stack, an idea crystalizing in his mind.

Hannibal scanned Will's shelves of books, interested by the things someone like Will read in his spare time. He found Will's taste in literature remarkably similar to his own. Classical and philosophical, with gothic and dark twists. Where Hannibal had medical and psychological texts, though, Will had books about fishing and wildlife. There was a sparse scattering of novels from other horror authors, but they did not dominate the shelves.

“You know, I think someone is really trying to convince Jack Crawford I’m a killer,” Will said, emerging from the hall, still rubbing a towel over his head, “you wouldn’t believe what they found at the most recent scene.”

Hannibal’s focus immediately sharpened. He had been sure he had left no evidence. Especially not anything that would point to Will.

“What did they find?” he asked calmly, hoping Will wouldn’t see how invested he was in the answer.

Will pulled the towel down to hang on his shoulders as Hannibal poured them each a glass of wine. His damp curls looked impossibly soft and silky, and Hannibal wanted to sink his hands into them again.

“They found one of my books,” he said, and Hannibal frowned, “a signed copy of Grotesque But Useful. Sitting right under the girl’s feet. Of course, my fingerprints were on it, but no others. That’s why Jack arrested me that night.”

Hannibal considered this, careful not to show the anger building up inside him. Someone had clearly tampered with his scene. His gift for Will. Someone who wanted Will to be seen as a killer.

They must have been following him. They might have been following him for some time.

They might have learned where Will lives.

Hannibal was conflicted. He suddenly felt he could not leave Will here alone. It wouldn’t be safe. But what excuse could he realistically give for insisting on being here, or taking Will away? Could he tell Will to establish better safety measures? To lock his doors and watch for suspicious individuals?

No. He couldn’t do that. This was still new between them, and he might come off as overbearing and possessive. Will might reject him.

Then the only option was to find them before they could put Will in danger.

“Hey,” Will said, touching Hannibal’s arm and pulling him from his thoughts, “it’s okay. Catherine says she can keep them from coming after me unless they have a good reason from now on. I’ll be alright.”

Hannibal sighed softly and nodded.

He would have been upset with how much Will seemed to like Catherine Meadows, if she were not a necessary presence. As it was, he was being careful to not begrudge her place in Will’s life.

“I wish I could do something to help you,” he told Will, taking his hands gently, “I wish I could protect you from this all.”

Will huffed a laugh.

“I’m not a damsel in distress,” he said, kissing Hannibal softly, “but I appreciate the thought.”

Being around Hannibal was like a drug.

Will was almost never in the present moment, his mind off somewhere else and wandering. He could entertain multiple trains of thought at once, and was highly observant, but it was as if he was watching his entire life from behind glass.

When he was around Hannibal, he felt solid and present. Everything was more vivid and real to him. He loved it, and he wanted to stay that way as much as possible.

He also didn’t feel the urge to write nearly as strongly. It might have been because of how grounded he was, he didn’t need to distract himself by creating other worlds and lives. He could fully enjoy the life and moment he was in.

Will was pleased with all of this, of course, but he couldn’t help but feel there was something wrong. Hannibal was acting slightly off. It could have been all due to Will’s recent decision to really come to terms with just what it was that made Hannibal dangerous. Because Hannibal always seemed so amused and pleased when Will said it. As if it was all some joke he was preparing to let Will in on.

Will also couldn’t help but think Hannibal had seemed somewhat pleased to hear Will wouldn’t be able to talk to Beverly for a while. As if he wanted Will to be cut off from the entire world, except for him.

Honestly, that in and of itself wouldn’t really have bothered Will all that much. He enjoyed the way Hannibal was possessive and protective of him, despite this being so new between them. It made him feel wanted and safe. Which he certainly wasn’t used to. His personality had ensured he was very rarely someone people wanted around all that much.

But Hannibal seemed to thrive off Wills presence. He loved being around Will, and coveted the time Will spent away from him.

What was really bothering Will was the accumulation of many small things. Hannibal had made the comment about going through Will’s things, and earlier had said that thing about letting Will see him, and the way his expression had gone peculiarly blank when Will told him about the book being at the crime scene.

Will wondered if it was entirely insane to consider that Hannibal might be the killer they were chasing. He had begun to go back over every interaction they had had, now with the information that he had recently gained. That Hannibal had read his books. That Hannibal had not only read them, but enjoyed them, owned copies of all of them, and had read at least one of them repeatedly.

Hannibal’s behavior had done little to refute the idea that Hannibal was the killer, He was clearly intelligent enough to have done it, had the medical skill to have done them well, and

he had an artistic leaning. All things Will thought the killer would have. Hannibal fit the profile Will had built of who the killer must be.

He wondered if the FBI had a similar profile. He bitterly thought, if Jack had any say in it, they wouldn't have even a mediocre profile. It would just be a picture of Will, there, because he was determined Will was guilty of something, if not the murders.

That wasn't entirely fair, but they hadn't been fair to him. Will didn't feel much regret in thinking that way about them.

Will was conflicted about this all, because he was gluttonous for Hannibal. He was taking everything he could get, like a new addict who hadn't yet felt the crash.

So Will asked Hannibal to stay over, despite what he thought might be going on. They shared the wine, shared kisses, and shared Will's bed. Will couldn't stop thinking about the murders, but they seemed less and less terrible the more Hannibal touched him and spoke in those low tones to him.

If Hannibal had killed for him, maybe Will didn't mind all that much.

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Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Hannibal knew what he would do for the next scene. He knew what it would be, and the imagery was solidifying in his head like ice crystals on a January lake. It would be beautiful, and Will would know for certain that his suspicions were correct.

If he found them in time, he would make the scene using this other killer who had so rudely intruded on Will's life. It would be just.

Will was so beautiful.

Will was asleep on his side, facing Hannibal in the bed. His dark hair was like a halo around his face, framing it so perfectly he could have been an artist's concept of an angelic being.

And he *wanted* Hannibal there.

That thought still sent Hannibal reeling when it came to mind. Will wanted him there. Hannibal did not have to steal these moments. He did not have to force his way into Will's life in order to see him this way. Hannibal was not sure he would have been able to if it had been the only way. Will was far too intelligent, and even now was near to seeing Hannibal for what he truly was.

Will had *chosen* him.

Will Graham, who had hundreds of admirers, and surely received propositions and proposals by the dozens every day, had chosen Hannibal.

Hannibal would do everything within his power to keep Will now that he had him. No matter the cost, he would not lose Will.

Will made a soft, slightly distressed sound in his sleep and a crease formed between his brows. His lips twitched down into a frown, and he let out a sharp puff of air.

Will was dreaming. He must have been having a nightmare. Or at least one of those dreams he didn't call nightmares because they didn't bother him after he woke.

Hannibal watched him curiously, wondering what this dream was about. Will's mind always managed to conjure such unique and striking conceptual images. Whatever it was, Hannibal wished he could see it. He imagined he might be able to simply touch their foreheads together and enter the dream through some form of osmosis. It was a whimsical idea, and it made him smile.

Will made another sound, deep in his throat, as if a scream were trapped in there and unable to escape. He turned so he was lying on his back, and tipped his head so his neck arched.

He was beautiful.

Hannibal's teeth sank into the column of Will's throat, and he gasped.

He felt as if he were being eaten alive.

And that was just fine. He didn't even think he wanted to save himself.

Hannibal's love has teeth. I knew it the moment I realized that was what I saw in his eyes. Once he has his teeth in me, I'll never escape him. I'll be trapped in his love forever.

That's what I want.

Hannibal pulled away, his teeth disengaging from the flesh of Will's throat so he could loom above Will. It was dark, and Will could smell pomegranates. Hannibal's eyes reflected the light like a cat's eyes, flashing red.

The blood around his mouth and on his teeth looked black.

Will looked up and saw the moon.

The moon trembled in its place, then fell. It dropped, turning into a coin that turned and flipped over in the air. It fell into a pool of blood, making a plinking sound Will associated with wishing fountains.

"What would you wish?" Hannibal asked, and Will realized they were standing on a dock over a lake of blood, where the moon had just landed.

Will's blood was gone from Hannibal's face, and he was wearing one of his regular suits. He looked beautiful and dangerous, lit now only by the stars. His eyes flashed again.

Will opened his mouth, thinking he might wish for Hannibal to stay with him, or the FBI to leave them both alone. No sound emerged, though, and Hannibal stepped up so their chests were pressed together.

Hannibal leaned in, close to Will's ear. Will felt his warm breath against his skin, and Hannibal whispered to him.

"Gods require sacrifices, dear Will. What blood will you spill for a wish?"

Will woke with a start.

For once, Freddie Lounds got to the chase before Jack Crawford. At least, the pictures showed up on her website before Jack got to Will.

This was a strange scene. It was on par for any one of Will's books, to the eyes of most people, but it had actually been conceptualized while Will had been feverish. The one idea from a fever that had stuck. Most things didn't frighten Will, much less his own books, but this book had unnerved him deeply.

The worst part about what he saw today was that he recognized the woman who had been killed.

Will hadn't asked her name, and she had been too nervous to offer it. She had only offered the name of her niece, who loved his books. It was Lily's aunt. The woman from the library signing, who had approached him afterwards, to sign the book for Lily.

And Will knew what the personalized message was in the book at the last scene. He was sure it was the book he had signed for Lily.

The woman sat in an armed chair, her abdominal cavity hollowed out and empty. Her hands were on the armrests, her fingers splayed and holding strings taut in front of her. If the killer had truly followed Will's book to the letter, those strings would have been made from her own intestines.

Hannibal had not done this. He was still laying in Will's bed, and hadn't left at all during the night. She hadn't been killed last night, but she had certainly been displayed while Hannibal had been here. She was sitting in a music hall.

One thing that certainly hadn't been a part of Will's design sat in front of the woman, on a music stand. Propped open as if for her to play on those strings made of herself.

A hardcover notebook. Dark, smooth red. The stand was the kind made of wire and entirely collapsible, so the silver print on the cover of the notebook was plainly visible.

His notebook .

So, despite all his efforts and care, the book had fallen into the hands of the FBI after all. It would be taken, touched, processed, and possibly never given back.

It was *gone.*

Will sat at his typewriter as he tried to come to terms with this loss. It was somewhat ridiculous for him to be mourning it, because he knew it had come from a killer. He had known it was ridiculous from the first moment he had realized it was missing. He should have handed it over the moment he knew who it had come from.

But it hurt to lose it. Will felt a physical ache in his chest, as if a hand had taken his heart and was squeezing it. He could imagine the way the tips of the fingers would punch through the muscle when it squeezed hard, spurting his blood everywhere and painting his insides with it. He thought he could even imagine how it would feel.

Will loved notebooks, and each one given to him had a particular pedestal in his mind. It meant he was thought of and cared about. And as he wrote, the notebook became part of him,

until he felt it as a phantom limb. Losing this notebook felt like an amputation.

“You are awake very early,” Hannibal said, padding up behind Will, bending down and placing a kiss on the top of his head.

“I had a nightmare,” Will explained, though it wasn’t exactly true. What he said next was. “I didn’t want to wake you, and I couldn’t get back to sleep.”

The sound of his voice was sad, and a bit choked. He felt Hannibal tense slightly before stepping around to look him in the face.

“What is bothering you, Will?” he asked, his face shining with concern in the low light of the early morning.

Will swallowed hard before he opened his phone and handed it to Hannibal, the screen alight with the image of the crime scene.

“This is from Toughest Gut,” Hannibal said with a frown, “but you did not write anything about a notebook.”

Will huffed a laugh.

“No, I didn’t. Clearly, whoever did this wanted me to know they’re the one who took it. And now Jack has it. I don’t think I’m ever going to get it back now.”

Will saw a flash of hot anger in Hannibal’s eyes. Hannibal was livid. Will hadn’t realized he could be that angry.

“I had thought this killer did not want to hurt you,” Hannibal said, “but this is clearly an intentional consequence.”

Will nodded, then shook his head.

“This isn’t the same killer,” he said, and knew it was true. He still thought the first one was most likely Hannibal. “this is someone who doesn’t like all the attention I’m getting. Or maybe they don’t like the works that are getting the attention. Toughest Gut is completely different from my other novels. It’s far worse, and in some ways better. I’ll bet it’s the only one this killer likes. The first one likes them all. At least that’s what I think.”

Hannibal considered that, holding Will’s hands in his gently.

Will wondered.

If Hannibal was the first killer, that meant this new one had tampered with the last scene. A scene Hannibal had created.

That would explain some of the anger Will had seen. Will knew Hannibal was proud, and took great pride in his work. That someone had changed his artistic scene, the tableau he had made for Will in some way, would have been the lowest kind of insult. If they hoped to get his attention, they had. If they had thought to earn his regard, they had made a fatal blunder.

It was strange. Will was having no difficulty conceptualizing Hannibal as the original killer. Hannibal seemed to fall perfectly into the role, as if it had been made for him.

Then, Will thought of something.

The broken window latch.

It was possible someone had broken in. He hadn't looked that closely. He had thought the weather had done it.

If someone had broken in while he hadn't been home, they hadn't taken anything as far as he could tell.

Was it still safe to be here?

"What are you thinking of?" Hannibal asked softly, "your expression is quite intense."

Will sighed.

"I just don't want to be alone," he said, "I don't want you to leave."

Will caught the flash of pleased satisfaction on Hannibal's face, and it added to his slowly growing determination that Hannibal was the killer. As of yet, he had nothing to refute it.

All circumstantial, though. It wouldn't hold up in court. Not that it needed to.

"Would you like me to stay here, or would you like to come home with me?" Hannibal asked.

Will thought about it for a bit.

If they broke in again, the new killer could steal anything. They could plant evidence. If he left, he would be leaving all his things completely unprotected.

But Will felt exposed, now. His safe places had been violated. It was as if they were still here, somewhere, watching him. Voyeuristic.

He didn't like the idea of staying there.

"Could I come with you?" he asked, "It's probably smarter for us to not be so isolated in the woods. Just in case something were to happen."

Hannibal smiled and nodded. He seemed pleased with that decision.

"Of course," he said, and kissed Will softly, "as soon as you are packed and ready, we can leave."

Chapter End Notes

Sometimes I have a real God complex when it comes to my fics. Just in case you couldn't tell. XD I'm really enjoying this one.

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Hannibal was pleased.

Though he knew it was not entirely logical to think so, he felt Will would be much safer in his home than anywhere else. He could protect Will there. Will belonged there, in Hannibal's life, among his things.

Hannibal thought of Will more and more as his own. As if Will belonged to him, when Hannibal knew it was more likely that it was the other way around.

Perhaps it was somehow mutual, that they owned each other. At least in the ways that mattered.

Hannibal was not pleased with this other killer. Whoever they were, it was becoming more likely they would be the cause of Will being arrested again. Hannibal had to find them and find a way to reveal what they had done. He had to show everyone Will had not killed anyone.

At least, not yet.

Will knew this was not Hannibal's work. He may not yet have fully come to terms with Hannibal being a killer, but Will knew the original killer had not tried to frame him for these crimes. It was more than Hannibal could have asked for.

That notebook.

Hannibal hadn't expected it to become so important to this game. He had only thought to see what Will would do when he received it. It had been somewhat of a litmus test. But it had become clear it meant much more to Will. Will had quickly become attached to the notebook, and it's loss had clearly caused him distress. Now he thought there was no hope of getting it back, Will appeared devastated.

It heartened Hannibal, and he was pleased Will had liked it that much.

But this other killer had seized upon it and taken the gift Hannibal had given Will, corrupting it into something that implicated Will in the crimes. Hannibal didn't know if the killer knew he had given Will the notebook. It may have simply been the most convenient opportunity they had seen. It didn't matter all that much, because Hannibal was going to kill them.

"I have something to confess," Will said, drawing Hannibal's attention.

Will hesitated for a moment, possibly to see if Hannibal would probe him. Hannibal didn't, not wanting to seem overbearing.

"It's about that notebook."

Hannibal was instantly focused. He didn't know what Will was going to say, but he was interested about why he was saying it now. Will hadn't talked much about the notebook other than worrying over where it had gone.

Will gave a sigh.

"I got it in the mail."

That was an interesting way to start.

"It came with a letter. A letter I know was written by the killer. The first killer. They sent me the notebook."

Hannibal hummed an acknowledgement, hoping to keep his interest hidden. He wanted Will to continue.

"I don't know exactly why I kept it," Will confessed, his fingers fidgeting in his lap, "I mean, I shouldn't have. I gave the letter to Jack. Hell, I gave him half the random fan mail I got that day just to convince him I wasn't hiding anything."

Will took a deep breath, his eyes closed as if he were meditating on something.

"I kept it, and I was getting damn near obsessed with it. It was the perfect notebook. Everything about it was exactly how I like notebooks. It was as if the killer knew all of that about me. I kept it, and jealously kept it away from Jack. It was a gift from a killer, and I loved it."

Will was silent for a moment, and Hannibal thought he might have finished what he wanted to say. It was certainly more than Hannibal had expected at this point. This was something secret. Something Will probably hadn't told anyone else, and didn't intend to.

"Now, if that happened again, if the killer sent me something, I wouldn't even give Jack the letter. He ruined any chance he had of keeping that line of information open. I wish I hadn't given him the first one. I wish I still had it. This killer. They-" Will cut off, seeming to flounder for words in a way that was not common for him. He pressed his lips together in his frustration before letting out another soft sigh.

"They are creating something beautiful. Something most people refuse to understand. I thought I wanted to get them caught so I could meet them in a safe environment. Now, I don't care. I don't want them caught just out of spite for Jack, but I want to meet them even more desperately. I want to see the world the way they do, understand what they see in my work that's so inspiring to them. I want to know them."

Will ran his hands over his face.

"I sound like someone who belongs in either prison or a mental institution," he muttered.

"No, Will," Hannibal said gently, "You sound like someone who is reevaluating your stance on morality. That is only natural for someone faced with such a situation. I would be more

concerned if he held fast to your original position. It is healthy and good that you are allowing your mind to change."

Will smiled ruefully and looked out the window of the car. Baltimore was passing in a grey blur under the overcast sky. It might rain later.

"Reevaluating my stance on morality," Will mused, "you have such a way with words. Maybe you should be the writer instead of me."

Hannibal smiled.

"I have something to confess," Franklyn said, twisting his hands together nervously.

Hannibal waited patiently, though his mind was on Will. Will, sitting in Hannibal's study as he worked today. Will's life and Hannibal's coming together into a tapestry of fate. It was perfect.

"You know that notebook in all the pictures of the recent crime scene?"

Hannibal's attention snapped sharply back to Franklyn, then. He was talking about the notebook.

"I am aware of it, yes," Hannibal agreed, careful not to demand anything of Franklyn. Most likely, he had nothing important to say regardless.

Franklyn's fidgeting increased in energy, and his eyes darted around the room, refusing to land.

"It's my fault," he finally blurted, and the rest followed like an unstoppered keg, "I took it from the party. Will left it on the table, and he was arrested, so I picked it up. I just wanted it to be safe until he got out. I know he didn't kill anyone, of course, so I knew he'd get out. I thought I could give it to him, and he'd see I could help him, and we could talk. That's all I wanted."

Hannibal was stunned into silence. He couldn't entirely understand what the implications of this were. Franklyn was certainly no killer. He didn't have the stomach to read about murder, much less do it himself.

"What happened to it?" Hannibal asked, careful to keep his darkening anger out of his voice and his face.

Franklyn began to cry, rivulets of tears streaking down his face as he sniffed back his running nose.

"I don't know," he sobbed, "I lost it. I thought it was on the table by my front door, but it disappeared. And now it was at the crime scene. It's all my fault."

Hannibal offered no reassurance. He did not feel capable of making it sound at all convincing.

This was all because of Franklyn. If he had not stolen the notebook, Alana would have had it when Will called, and Will would have gotten it back by now. Franklyn had stolen it, and basically given it to this other killer. He was lucky to have survived.

Unless it wasn't luck that spared him.

Tobias Budge.

Franklyn's best friend. The man Hannibal had heard so much about, because of Franklyn's obsessive tendencies.

Everything fit. Tobias owned a string shop. The scene from Toughest Gut.

Tobias Budge had done this.

Hannibal hadn't even thought of the man in months. Franklyn hadn't talked of him recently, his obsession with Will eclipsing all else, and Hannibal himself had been preoccupied with other things. Tobias had never been very interesting to Hannibal, and he simply hadn't cared to think of him.

Tobias had wanted Hannibal's attention, and now he had it.

"What should I do?" Franklyn asked, and Hannibal was forced to think about his patient again.

"What do you think you should do?" Hannibal asked.

Franklyn sniffled pitifully, looking at Hannibal as if he held all the secrets to the universe.

"I suppose I should tell the police, right?" he asked, clearly still wanting to be told what to do.

Hannibal would be more than pleased to lead him in a direction that would benefit Hannibal's own designs.

"Do you believe that woman was killed because you stole the notebook? He asked, tipping his head at Franklyn.

Franklyn's eyes widened at his use of the word *stolen,* and he bit his lip.

"No," he said, "I think she would probably have been killed either way. The person who killed her wanted to send a message. They could have done it without the notebook."

Hannibal nodded.

"Then your actions did not change the outcome of events," he said, "And you have nothing to atone for. Your intentions were honorable. Perhaps more than honorable. You have no need to

tell the police unless you believe you have reason to ask forgiveness."

Franklyn sat up a bit, as if a weight had been lifted from his shoulders. He felt better because of Hannibal's reassurance. He wouldn't tell the police.

Hannibal was satisfied, but far from happy.

Franklyn would not tell the police. He would not give them the information they needed to find Tobias. Hannibal would be free to deal with it on his own.

But Franklyn felt as if he was resolved of guilt. Righteously, Franklyn should be wracked with guilt over what he had done. It really was his fault, and Hannibal wanted him to suffer for it.

But the world was not perfect. Franklyn felt as if he was not responsible, and Hannibal knew better. Hannibal would handle everything.

If the chance produced itself, perhaps Hannibal would deal with Franklyn as well.

But first he would be taking care of Tobias Budge.

46

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Will was feeling strangely luxuriant.

Being in Hannibal's house made him feel odd, but in a pleasant sort of way. Hannibal's things were all very fine and rich, and being among them made him feel pampered and doted upon. From the soaps to the food to the furniture, everything here was made to make someone feel good.

Will's own home was nothing to scoff at. He had nice things, and things he liked. He had collected things he liked all his adult life until he had a perfect little corner of the world specifically tailored for himself. He felt fine when he was home, and liked it much better than being somewhere public.

But Hannibal's home felt like a castle. Like he was being waited upon and treated. Things weren't just nice, but exquisite. He felt like one of those fancy poodles after their owner brings them to the spa. He thought he would have to buy some fancy soaps for himself, just so he could smell this way more often.

Will sat in the study, stretching out on the couch with his laptop on his legs. He was wearing one of Hannibal's dressing gowns, and soft music was playing. A record of Mozart Will had found.

Hannibal owned a record player. Will wasn't the only person who liked retro technology, apparently. Will felt a bright warmth in his chest at the thought.

Will's phone rang, tearing him away from his pleasant thoughts. His good mood was further dampened when he saw who it was.

"Hello, Jack," he sighed into the phone, knowing the man was more convinced of his guilt than ever. The latest scene had literally had his name on it. "How can I help you?"

There was a brief silence, likely allowing Jack to gather his thoughts.

"I just want this to stop," Jack said at length, "I don't want anyone else to die."

Will scoffed.

"Then find the killer," he said, "It isn't me, and you're only wasting time by bothering me."

Jack sighed heavily.

"You still aren't going to confess to anything?" he asked, "even after this one?"

Will rolled his eyes, not caring that Jack couldn't see it. He hoped the man could feel it over the phone.

"Did you call to ask me to translate what's in the notebook?" he asked, closing his laptop and shifting on the couch, "I can understand you might want to know what it says."

There was a curious pause from the other end. One that made Will wonder.

"No. Someone else will call you about that," Jack said, "I just wanted to give you one more chance to tell me what's going on."

Will thought that was very curious, but he didn't know quite what it meant.

"Agent Crawford," Will said flatly, "I did everything in my power to help you, and was repaid by being arrested at my own event. Do you expect me to want to help you again, after that?"

Jack sighed again. He sounded exhausted, and Will thought he must have been working himself to the bone over this case. It made Will feel a bit guilty, sitting in a satin robe, in a house as close to a mansion as he had ever entered, smelling like lavender soap. He certainly wasn't losing much sleep over it all, while Agent Crawford seemed dead on his feet.

"I don't *expec* t anything," Jack said, "But I want to put this guy behind bars. I thought you wanted that too."

Will set his jaw and set his mind. He was about to lie to Jack Crawford again.

"I do," he said, "Of course I want to see them stopped and put away. I don't want him to make any more scenes from my books into reality. But you're doing it wrong, and I'm done talking to you."

Will ended the call and huffed.

He wanted some coffee.

Will set aside his laptop and headed to the kitchen, phone still in hand. Hannibal had shown him how to use the French press, a gadget Will was fascinated by, and the coffee was amazing.

As the coffee was underway, Will called Catherine Meadows.

"You'll never guess who just called me," Will told her.

Catherine was silent for a touch longer than Will had expected, and he knew there was something he didn't know. Something important.

"Who?" she asked.

Will plowed on, deciding she would tell him what it was when he needed to know.

“Jack Crawford. He was trying to convince me to confess.”

Catherine sighed sharply, and Will could picture her frown.

“Will, Agent Crawford has been taken off the case.”

Oh. That made sense. That explained the beat of silence during his call. He wasn’t calling to ask Will to translate the notes, because he didn’t have the authority anymore. At least that meant Will hadn’t been lying to on the record, then. He supposed Jack was still law enforcement, but it wasn’t as if the man was going to go around telling anyone what Will had said to him during a phone call he shouldn’t have made.

If he had been taken off the case, he definitely blamed Will for it.

“That explains a few things,” Will replied, “but why did he call me?”

Catherine sighed again, this time softer.

“He shouldn’t have. He probably didn’t expect you to tell anyone. He could get into a lot of trouble for it.”

That sparked some dark impulse in Will, and he wanted Jack to be in trouble.

“If you make trouble for him, right?” he asked.

Catherine hummed an agreement.

“Unless you decide to call the FBI yourself and do it. Or if you don’t want me to.”

“I do want you to,” Will said quickly, “If he doesn’t suffer repercussions for this, he’ll keep calling me. I need the FBI to be aware. They should be able to put a leash on him. Am I asking too much of you? Are you sick of me?”

Catherine laughed, and Will was glad. She had sounded tired as well, and he wanted to brighten her spirits if he could.

“Not at all, Will,” she said, and she sounded brighter, “in fact, I’ve kind of always wanted to have beef with the FBI. They could use a few knocks every now and then, lest they believe they’re omnipotent.”

Will laughed as well, then.

He had already liked Catherine plenty, and now he was glad. She was tough, smart, and refused to back down for anyone. He would be glad to be the reason she had the chance to take on the FBI and their lawyers. He just hoped she wouldn’t get hurt in the long run from it.

“Jack is a fair example that they do, he told her, “and I think you can do it, probably better than anyone.”

Catherine hummed, not in agreement or disagreement, but in amusement. She was getting more comfortable talking to him. That pleased him, because he really did like her, and he wanted her to like him.

“I’ll go get to it, then,” Catherine said, “unless you have something else you’d like to talk about.”

“No,” Will said, almost sad he didn’t, “you should go. Both of us have work to do.”

Catherine bid him goodbye and the call ended. Will took a long drink of his coffee, humming to himself when he noticed it didn’t taste quite the same as when Hannibal made it. Hannibal must do something else to it Will didn’t know about.

Will nursed the coffee for a while, thinking about what he was going to do.

He certainly wasn’t going to cooperate with the FBI. That was one thing he was sure of. But if he was right about Hannibal being the original killer, was he really going to do nothing and stay with him? Was he going to ask him to stop?

He wouldn’t.

For whatever reason, Will knew he wouldn’t ask Hannibal to stop. If Will did ask, he didn’t know for sure if Hannibal would stop, but it would never be tested. He didn’t want Hannibal to stop. He saw the tableaus Hannibal had created behind his eyes every time he blinked. They were beautiful.

Maybe that was vain of him, because they were his own design, after all. Maybe he was just feeding his own ego by wanting Hannibal to keep killing for him. Maybe that was what all of this was about.

Even then, Will thought Hannibal would encourage it. Hannibal wanted Will to be selfish, and act on his darker impulses. Will had been able to tell that from early on in their friendship. Now, he thought Hannibal wanted him to be selfish, and act on those impulses, just so long as Will allowed Hannibal to be there. Hannibal didn’t want Will to have what he wanted if it wasn’t Hannibal.

Will might have to talk to Hannibal about that.

After he was sure, and Hannibal knew Will knew.

Chapter End Notes

Jack? Suffering consequences for his actions? In MY fic? More likely than you think ;)

47

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Hannibal walked in the front door and was instantly pulled into a kiss. Will had been waiting for him.

The idea pleased Hannibal, and he kissed back fervently. Hannibal had not had a bad or especially tiring day, but it had been made instantly better by his reception at home.

He wondered if Will's suspicions made him more affectionate or less affectionate. Will certainly had suspicions, Hannibal was sure of it now. All Will needed was a confirmation from Hannibal himself. Hannibal was curious to see how Will reacted when it came.

"How has your day been?" Hannibal asked, smiling and carding his fingers through Will's hair.

Will returned the smile, looking beautiful and radiant as ever.

"Terrible," he said cheerfully, "I got a call from Jack Crawford, admonishing me to confess. I called Catherine after, to let her know the latest from the FBI and she says he's not even on the case anymore. He was just calling me out of the goodness of his heart."

Anger flared in Hannibal's chest, and he could taste it in his mouth, bitter and acidic. Jack had intruded on Will's time, even here in Hannibal's home. Where he was supposed to feel safe and relaxed.

Will kissed Hannibal again, placating, as if he could see how upset Hannibal was.

"I told her to give him Hell, and she's more than happy to," Will said, "and other than that, my day was wonderful. It was nice to be away from home, but not feel exposed. I know you probably expected as much. I just want you to know I appreciate it."

Hannibal hummed in agreement and released Will so they could make their way to the kitchen. He had been feeling inspired since his revelation about Tobias Budge, and would like nothing more than to prepare a meal and see Will eat it.

"Thank you, Will," he said pleasantly, "I admit I am not pleased to hear Jack has been a continual bother to you, but it is heartening to know I was not wrong to think my home may do some good for you."

Will smiled and nodded.

"It's strange, though," Will said, "My house feels like home, but I'm so used to it none of it feels novel anymore. Being here felt new and exciting, but I wasn't uncomfortable. I really enjoyed it."

Hannibal was pleased by that. He wanted Will to enjoy being here, and wanted him to be comfortable. If the novelty of it wore off, he hoped Will wouldn't grow bored with him.

Will set up his laptop at the kitchen table, opened notebook next to it, and sat as Hannibal began taking out ingredients. It was the notebook Hannibal had given him during one of their first sessions. It was not similar to the one he had sent under his alternate identity, but it still warmed him slightly to see it.

"May I ask what you are writing, or is that a topic you would prefer not to discuss?" Hannibal asked.

He hoped Will would talk about it, but he recognized Will might want to talk of other things. Will didn't often share his work with anyone before it was published.

Will grinned and turned to the laptop. His fingers began typing away, rapid like gunfire.

"Actually, that's fun," he said, "this story I've started, the one I got going on during our sessions, is a bit different from my usual stuff. Not in the same way Toughest Gut was. This one is calmer, almost peaceful. But in some way that makes it more disturbing."

Hannibal was interested, and he hoped Will would continue.

"Something really necessary for convincing horror is including elements of hope," Will said, and Hannibal thought he might have become distracted from his original train of thought. He was satisfied to listen regardless. "If everything seems hopeless, then there doesn't seem to be any point. No one cares about the terror, because you've created a world where only a nihilist can survive. By giving them hope, the idea that the evil can be vanquished, you can inspire despair and true, soul shaking horror. The idea that, even when there's a chance to survive, to defeat the monster, there will be pain and death. Especially if deaths are caused by things that come to humans naturally. Greed or self-preservation. Those are what really frighten people."

Hannibal was fascinated.

Will Graham had not frequently spoken publicly about writing. He preferred to be private and keep to himself.

These were the kinds of things that would enrapture concert halls full of people if he ever decided to do it. They could fill stadiums with students of literature or aspiring authors, even just fans of his work, and they would hold their breath as he said these things. They wouldn't want to miss a single word. Every moment was worth pounds of gold, to them.

Will didn't talk about his writing to crowds. He was doing it only for Hannibal.

"That's why I stick to writing the way I do," Will said, "when all the monsters are nothing more than men, it's clear they can be stopped. It's obvious they shouldn't have been allowed to do what they do, but they get away with it for far longer than they should. Just like in reality. My writing leaves people unnerved, knowing the things I wrote are entirely too possible."

Will paused in both his typing and speaking, as if he had suddenly shut down entirely. Then, his fingers resumed their rapid tapping a moment before he began to speak again.

“Supernatural monsters, even the kind with a weakness built in, feel too inevitable. Like no one can stop them, or could have stopped them until they did. It’s easier to brush it off.”

Will smiled, his expression distant. He didn’t seem entirely aware of where he was or that he was speaking. Hannibal didn’t interrupt him.

“Eldon Stammets is the latest of these monsters of mine,” he said, “he’s a pharmacist. Someone we trust almost unquestioningly in society. Most people he comes into contact with emerge unharmed and unbothered. He has a very specific victim profile.”

Will went on to tell Hannibal about his latest story. One he said would not be a novel, but a short story. Hannibal didn’t doubt Will could have made it into a novel if he wanted, but Will was aware of himself in a way Hannibal admired. Will knew he wanted to keep this story short, concentrated and undiluted. Will knew what he was doing.

And he was beautiful.

Will’s phone rang, pulling him from his musings. He had been thinking about this story, and wondering if Hannibal would ever make him a scene from it once it was published. If he did, Will thought it would be enchanting.

Will didn’t recognize the number, and hesitated before answering. He saw Hannibal glance at him curiously.

“Will Graham.”

“Yes. I know. This is Agent Kramer. I’m in charge of the investigation into these recent murders that recreate scenes from your novels. I was hoping I could ask you to come in and talk with me.”

Will smiled to himself. Hannibal seemed to relax when he saw the smile, leaning back into the couch with his glass of wine.

Kramer’s voice was softer than Jack’s, and Will imagined a man with neatly pressed shirts and charcoal colored suit coats. They would be slightly big, and be identical so he could wear the same one for weeks in a row without anyone knowing. He would wear a plain tie, or something with a boring pattern that didn’t draw the eye. Dark blues and greys. He would keep his hair short, possibly to hide a receding hairline or premature grey hairs. His shoes would be old and worn, but polished relatively recently to keep up appearances.

“If you want to question me, then no,” Will said, “I already went through all of that with Agent Crawford. But if you want me to translate what my notebook says, I’d be happy to. I know it would be suspicious if I didn’t, and I don’t really have anything to hide. I just hope you’ll leave me alone other than that.”

Agent Kramer had the decency to hesitate before offering disingenuous promises, at least.

“All I want from you at the moment is the notebook,” he confirmed, “I can’t promise I won’t have more questions for you in the future, and I can’t promise you are not a suspect. I apologize for the behavior of my predecessor. I hope you will cooperate.”

Will hummed thoughtfully. He had no intention of cooperating, but he did think he would ask for something. Just to see.

“When I finish the translation, can I have the notebook?” he asked.

Agent Kramer was silent. Will waited, knowing the agent was just trying to get him to keep talking. Fill the silence. That didn’t work on Will. He preferred silence, and had no intention of giving the FBI anything they didn’t ask for.

“It’s a nice notebook, mister Graham,” Kramer said at length.

Will hummed his agreement.

“It is.”

Will let the silence stretch out again.

Kramer sighed.

“I can’t promise that,” he said at last, “I would like to, but I can’t. I am sorry for the inconvenience, mister Graham. I hope you understand.”

Will nodded to himself, disappointed but not surprised.

“I understand. I’m sure my lawyer’s number is on file. I apologize for *this* inconvenience, but I won’t talk to you at all if she’s not there. Call her to set up an appointment.”

Kramer wasn’t happy about that, but he agreed and the call ended. Will considered it a success. At least, he hadn’t made an enemy out of Agent Kramer yet. Catherine might help him to avoid that when they met in person, or she might make an enemy out of him herself. Will couldn’t be sure, but he didn’t care all that much just at the moment.

Hannibal was patiently awaiting an explanation.

Will took a drink from his own glass of wine and sighed. He set the glass back down and turned it distractedly.

“That was Agent Kramer. Jack’s replacement. He wants me to come in to talk about the case.”

Hannibal nodded and set aside his glass. He had gathered as much, Will was sure.

“I can’t have the notebook,” he said, and saw the way Hannibal’s lips twitched downward slightly in a repressed frown. “But I think this guy might be more accommodating to me than

Jack was. At least at first."

Hannibal hummed, pulling Will towards him and trailing his nose along Will's jaw. It was a peculiar habit, but it never failed to make Will feel warm and pleasant when Hannibal did it.

"I'm certain he will have more trouble with you than the reverse," Hannibal said.

His lips touched Will's neck, and Will pushed him against the end of the couch. He couldn't handle it when Hannibal teased him like that.

"You're going to have trouble with me pretty soon," he said.

Hannibal grinned up at him.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry if updates are a bit slower for a while. I'm working on a couple of projects for October. I'll be posting at least two new stories for Spooky season, so watch out for those if you like ghosts or witches. ;)
Enjoy <3

48

Hannibal entered the little music shop and caught the bell before it could alert the owner of his presence. He could hear a violin playing a tune he did not know. It was something new and strange, but played by a clearly skilled hand.

He could understand the draw Tobias felt towards Toughest Gut. Perhaps he felt seen by Will, as if Will had written the book for him specifically.

Of course, Will had done no such thing. Hannibal believed, if Will had met and understood Tobias, he would have discarded the idea for the book entirely. Will did not write with the idea someone would relate to the horrors he designed.

Perhaps Tobias had learned about that, or had simply realized Will didn't think like him. That could have been enough to make him act the way he had been, though Hannibal believed there was more to it.

Because Tobias had not only tried to frame Will. He had violated Hannibal's scene as well.

When Tobias saw Hannibal in the doorway, he stopped playing.

"Doctor Lecter. I didn't hear you come in."

"I didn't want to interrupt your playing," Hannibal replied, surveying the room, "you are Franklyn's friend."

There was a flicker of distaste across Tobias' face, but he smoothed it over with a smile as he put down the violin and bow.

"You are his psychiatrist. I confess I have been planning to orchestrate a way to meet you," he said.

Hannibal nodded. He had expected as much.

"While that would have been more convenient, I did not feel I could wait until then. I was anxious to speak with you."

Tobias' smile wavered as he considered Hannibal's words. Or, perhaps, the tone with which they had been said.

"You're upset I played with your toy," he stated.

Hannibal's anger flared hot again. Tobias was crossing the line. Will was not a toy. Hannibal had never considered him as such. Tobias did not know what he was saying.

"I think you have made a miscalculation," Hannibal said, his tone cold and unforgiving.

Tobias’ face fell as he seemed to realize Hannibal was not there to thank or congratulate him. Now, he was disappointed and wary.

“He is not like us, Doctor Lecter,” Tobias said, “he doesn’t think like us, or act the way we do. He is not worth the effort.”

Hannibal smiled, though he felt no warmth towards the man. He had not come here to argue the point with Tobias. But he did want Tobias to learn just how wrong he had been.

“He is not like *you* , Mister Budge,” Hannibal agreed, “and I would not want him to be. He is more than you could dream to be.”

Tobias frowned and reached for a shelf where he had a piano wire garrote.

Tobias was quick, but Hannibal managed to subdue him with only a short altercation. He began to think up a believable excuse for his minor injuries as he loaded Tobias into his trunk. Will would notice them, he had no doubt. Soon, Hannibal would be able to tell him the truth about where they had come from.

If Will didn’t ask, Hannibal would not lie. He would prefer to only tell Will the truth.

Will let Hannibal read the new story before it went out to the editor and publisher. He hadn’t let anyone read his unpublished work since his third book had gone out. He never had alpha or beta readers. Just his editor and publisher. He hadn’t needed them.

But he liked this story, and in a way he had written it because of Hannibal.

He wanted Hannibal to be the first to read it.

Hannibal read slowly, clearly enjoying himself, and Will watched him.

Hannibal’s hands had bandages on some of the knuckles, one of his wrists was wrapped, and he had a bruise on his jaw. Hannibal had acted like nothing at all was the matter when he got home, and hadn’t offered any explanation for his injuries. He had been acting like they weren’t even there.

Will had an idea where the injuries had come from, and if Hannibal didn’t intend to lie about it Will had no desire to make him. If Hannibal felt he didn’t need to explain, Will thought that meant he was close to telling Will the whole truth, or at least giving him the final confirmation for his suspicions.

Will could be patient.

At length, Hannibal put down the pages of Will’s story and looked to the window thoughtfully. Will allowed him the time to put his thoughts together, knowing there would be no point in rushing him or demanding anything of him.

“You are correct that this is unlike your other works,” Hannibal said thoughtfully, “though of course your style is unmistakable. While your other stories may keep readers awake with fear for what might happen to them, this I believe may cost them sleep because it forces them to expand their view of themselves and the world.”

Will listened intently to what Hannibal was saying. He never wrote something with the intention of any deeper meaning, at least not at the top of his thinking, but he’d read enough reactions to his writing to know he somehow filled them with hidden messages. To this point, he had never written anything he hadn’t personally agreed with, in that respect.

He was curious to hear what Hannibal made of this story.

Hannibal turned and looked at Will, a clarity in his eyes that made Will feel as if he could really see every part of him.

“You have called into question the very nature of beauty and perception, highlighting the relationship between them and changing how the reader sees it. In order to understand this story, the reader must shift their own ideas and theories to better align with the character. The way you have written it is almost hypnotic, so that the readers may not realize the change is taking place until your killer is faced with the society that condemns his actions and views.”

Will felt as if his eyes were incredibly wide, as if that would help him see what Hannibal saw. He hadn’t heard anyone say anything like that about his work before. Hannibal’s thoughts had been concise and eloquent. Scholars who had written about his books had called his stories “Tricky”, “Devilish”, “almost too clever”, and all sorts of things amounting to what Hannibal meant by hypnotic. They meant he had used literary sleight of hand to do something in the story without them noticing. They all had one thing in common, though. A tone of anger in their words. As if they were either upset with Will for tricking them, or with themself for having once again fallen for the trick.

Hannibal wasn’t upset. He sounded as if he genuinely adored the way Will had written it. He understood and enjoyed it.

Maybe this was the real reason Will had been anxious to have Hannibal read it. Because Will knew he would understand it in a way no one else ever had.

“You like it,” Will heard himself say, knowing as he said it that it was a stupid thing to say.

Hannibal smiled warmly as Will felt his face heat in frustration at himself for being foolish.

“Will Graham,” Hannibal said, the name coming out as nearly a laugh, “I have never been witness to anything as beautiful as your mind. I adore you so.”

Will’s flush grew hotter.

Will Graham, famous author, lauded for his use of words and turn of phrase, was incapable of sounding intelligent in a spoken conversation when it really mattered.

Hannibal huffed another soft laugh, as if knowing what Will was thinking and feeling. He leaned toward Will and lifted his hands to cradle Will's jaw. The motion was affectionate, but served another purpose as it kept Will from looking away. Not that Will would have been able to tear his eyes away from this dangerous man he couldn't get enough of.

"Will Graham. It is miraculous to me that you are here. That I may touch you," Hannibal said, tracing his thumbs over Will's cheeks as Will stared back at him in stunned silence, "that I may kiss you."

Hannibal didn't pull Will to him for the kiss, though he easily could have. Instead, Hannibal leaned further and pressed his lips gently to Will's. It was soft, and nearly chaste. As if this was Hannibal's version of worship. Communion.

"If you were gone from my life tomorrow, I would believe this all a dream, for I never thought it a possibility. You are brilliant, and beautiful. You are everything, and I could not have dreamt up someone more perfect."

That wasn't true. Will didn't believe it. He refused to believe that.

Will certainly wasn't a perfect fit for Hannibal. Will didn't really fit in among Hannibal's things. Their lifestyles were entirely different. If Will was right about Hannibal being the killer, that was only another part of that. If Hannibal was the killer, Will was certain he would not be satisfied for Will to remain as he was. Hannibal would want Will to participate. Will had not been participating yet.

When Hannibal let Will know the truth, he would want Will to choose. He would want Will to participate.

Will reached out and took Hannibal's face in his hands. Hannibal allowed it without reacting, waiting to see what Will intended to to.

Will pulled Hannibal in and whispered in his ear.

"Liar."

Hannibal's eyes flashed, and he clearly intended to prove Will wrong.

49

Hannibal's teeth sank into the flesh of Will's throat, pulling life out of him like a creature of fantasy.

Will woke with a gasp, feeling Hannibal already pulling him close in the dark. It must have been clear he was having a vivid dream, and it had woken Hannibal. Had he been moving, or making sound in his sleep?

Will had a sudden *need* for Hannibal. He turned and shifted so he was looming over Hannibal.

In the dark, Hannibal was a dangerous shape against the lighter shade of the mattress.

"Will?" Hannibal asked, not sounding concerned at all. Just curious.

Will lowered himself so he was pressing down onto Hannibal, feeling the solid warmth of him there. Will put his face into Hannibal's neck and breathed him in.

"You're going to eat me alive," he said.

Hannibal tensed slightly under him, confirming to Will everything he had been suspecting. But he would still wait for Hannibal to tell him. He would wait as long as he had to, just so he could see what Hannibal wanted him to see. Hannibal was a magnificent creature, and Will wanted to see him the way he should be seen.

After a short moment, Hannibal relaxed again, kissing Will's neck and under his ear. His hands moved to Will's hips, pulling them even more flush together.

In the dark, Hannibal was glorious. He was a shadow and a shape, a monster and a demon. He was Will's own personal beast, tamed and domestic. Only for Will. Wild to the world, majestic and dangerous. For Will, he was whatever Will wanted.

"You might consume me first," Hannibal replied, and Will grinned.

Will could see Hannibal's returned expression of wicked delight. Those teeth always looked dangerous, and in the dark now they were certainly going to be the death of him.

Will had a pet tiger, and he was thrilled by all the dangerous potential that had. He had the power to control this monster if he wanted to. All Will had to do was ask, and he was sure Hannibal would give him anything.

Will would have to decide what he wanted.

Hannibal entered the kitchen to find Will sitting at the counter. He had his laptop open, but he was not looking at a document as usual. Instead, the screen was open to an article that showed what had become of Tobias Budge.

The man's flesh was covered with fungus, mushrooms sprouting from his arms and face. There were places where his flesh was nearly gone, creating an appearance almost as one of those Hollywood zombies.

Hannibal had enjoyed the time he had spent tending this crop. Just as in Will's story, it had been peaceful and pleasant. Everyone could learn something from reading Will's books. Even if it was just (as Franklyn had discovered) that they could not stomach the products of his imagination.

Tobias had not been diabetic, which Hannibal knew. It was the one thing that separated this scene from what Will had written. Hannibal would have preferred every detail be loyal to the story Will had created, but compromises had to be made. And this scene was special.

Will turned to look at him, still standing in the doorway.

Will had to know, now. The body being discovered on the day the story had been published meant someone had been working toward it for weeks before. Someone who had to have had previous knowledge of the story. Hannibal was the only one.

So Will had to know.

Will stood up and walked over to Hannibal. His expression was unreadable, and Hannibal didn't know what to expect from him. Hannibal could rarely predict Will, but he could usually read his expression.

Will took hold of Hannibal's tie, tugging it gently but not pulling Hannibal toward him. At least not yet.

"Buy me another notebook, Hannibal," Will said, "the first one was stolen."

So he did know.

Will pulled Hannibal into a kiss, and Hannibal pulled at him in return. Will was accepting him. Will was not frightened by what he had learned. He still wanted Hannibal.

"I will buy as many notebooks as you like," Hannibal said, slightly breathless from Will's kiss and the excess of relief he felt at finally being entirely seen, "anything you want."

Will laughed. He was beautiful.

"I suppose Tobias Budge was responsible for the Toughest Gut scene?" he asked.

Hannibal nodded.

"And for placing that book at my Grotesque but Useful tableau," he added, though he was sure Will knew that already, "I did not want you implicated in them in any way."

“Aside from it being obvious I was the architect,” Will pointed out.

Hannibal couldn’t help but smile. Will seemed to be glowing, though that might have only been Hannibal’s imagination. He was the most beautiful thing Hannibal had ever seen.

“Such a talented architect every city should envy,” he said, “the world would be a place bursting with elegance and beauty if it had a creator as talented as you.”

Will’s face flushed lightly, and he smiled. He was beautiful, and Hannibal believed every word he had just said. He was making Will into a kind of god, just to show everyone what was possible. Will now had power over life and death, and dictated the shape either would take.

Hannibal would give him any power he could, would shape the earth with his bare hands if Will asked it of him.

If Will knew this, what might he ask?

He had asked for a new notebook.

Hannibal grinned.

“Doctor Lecter, whatever am I going to do with a wicked thing like you?” Will asked.

“Kiss me again?” Hannibal asked, tugging Will closer.

Will laughed. And he did.

“Why did you kill that first man for me?” Will asked, making Hannibal glance up at him curiously.

“You know why,” Hannibal said casually.

Will smiled. He was lounging on the couch with his shoes off, dragging his toes along the outside of Hannibal’s thigh. Hannibal was clearly having a hard time concentrating on the book he had been trying to read. One of Will’s.

“Yes, I do, but I don’t think *you* do. I think you thought you knew why you were doing it at the time, but I don’t think you’ve gone and reflected on it recently.”

Hannibal’s expression was pensive. Will just continued to smile at him. There was something massively satisfying about this entire situation, and Will was reveling in every moment of it.

“Think about it for a moment,” Will said softly, “Think about why you would have done something so risky. You, the Chesapeake Ripper.”

There was a long moment of silence as Hannibal really did think about it. Slowly, like light coming into the sky at dawn, he lit up with understanding. It was a beautiful thing to see.

“Because I love you,” he said at last, smiling brightly at Will, “And I did, even then. I loved you before I was aware of it.”

Will sat up and leaned over, kissing him softly.

“I love you too, Hannibal.”

Hannibal attacked him with another kiss. It was the first time Will had admitted it aloud, and it had an effect on both of them.

“You are a romantic, whimsical fool at times,” Will said, “you risked being caught for the chance to send me a love letter. Before you even knew you were in love with me, and before I had even decided I could be friends with someone like you. I don’t generally like psychiatrists.”

Hannibal just looked at Will with wonder in his eyes, as if he couldn’t fully comprehend what Will was saying.

“You love me too,” he echoed, as if that was the last and only thing he had heard Will say.

Will huffed a laugh.

“Yeah. Even though you’re a psychiatrist, and even though you’re a serial killer, and even though you’re a pretentious fool. I think I really do love you.”

Hannibal smiled.

“I would raze the earth for you,” he said.

And Will believed him.

50

Agent Kramer was exactly how Will had pictured him. His navy blue tie looked garishly plain with his grey suit, and he had already scuffed the polish on his soft shoes.

Will thought Catherine seemed hesitantly optimistic about him, and that gave him some hope.

Will was glad the notes about his most recent story were in a different notebook. He would have a hard time explaining that. Not that Hannibal had made things very easy. If Will didn't know what his plan was, now, it would be all too easy to make a mistake.

Will couldn't think of any secrets they were keeping from each other now. If there was anything big, he was going to have some serious words with Hannibal.

Kramer had given Will a laptop from the FBI to type up his notes on, because that's how he was most used to transcribing his notebooks and it was faster. Catherine was just there to make sure Will wasn't asked any questions he didn't want to answer. So far, Kramer was being very careful with him.

"I hope you don't intend to make these notes public information," Will said as he typed.

Kramer grinned at him, and Will got the sense he smiled all the time around people he didn't trust. Probably to make them more comfortable with him so they might say more than they meant to. At the moment, it only managed to make Will feel awkward, as it was not quite the correct smile for the moment. It didn't feel natural at all.

"Why is that?" Kramer asked, "something in there you don't want people to see?"

Will knew what he was implying, and he almost laughed. Instead, he stopped typing and leveled Kramer with a look.

"As a matter of fact, the beginning of my next novel is here, so yes. I would prefer it not get out, because I don't like spoilers."

From the corner of his eye, Will saw Catherine hide a grin behind her hand. Kramer looked like he had just realized he'd been swearing in front of the pope, and he cleared his throat nervously.

"I understand, Mister Graham. Everything will be confidential. As long as there's nothing significant to the case in there, none of it will leave the FBI office buildings."

He seemed to mean it, but that didn't make Will trust that it was true. He didn't have much faith in the FBI these days. He had faith in Beverly, still, but she was only part of the machine, and she had little power over the actions of the FBI as an entity. She probably wouldn't even know Will had come in to do this.

“I appreciate that, Agent Kramer,” Will said, returning to his transcription, “I’ve gone all these years without spoiling a book, and I’d think it a shame to do so now.”

A brief expression crossed Kramer’s face, and Will saw exactly what the man thought of him.

Kramer thought Will was an arrogant author who unjustifiably considered himself a celebrity. He thought these were the particulars of a man who believe himself more important than he was.

But he didn’t know that Will had done these things before his name had seen the limelight. Kramer didn’t know that Will was avoiding spoiler because the thought of anyone finding out what he was thinking before he told them gave him anxiety.

Kramer didn’t understand that the Chesapeake Ripper had chosen Will.

Will didn’t care to explain it to him, either.

“Will my client be given the notebook when this is all over?” Catherine asked, startling Will.

He hadn’t asked her to find that out, or to press them to return it. He had only been concerned with not making the FBI more suspicious of him than they already were.

Kramer frowned, and Will knew he thought it was strange for Will to be so eager to get it back. It was only a notebook, after all.

“I can’t promise that,” Kramer said slowly, the same thing he had told Will before, “but I can try to get it back to him once we are done with it.”

Will almost laughed again. *When they were done with it*. Will knew that was a nearly worthless promise. If they wanted, they would never be done with it. It was up to them to decide what that meant.

Catherine wasn’t amused, but she didn’t seem all that upset either. Will wondered if that was just another of those skills lawyers had, regulating their reactions so they always seemed reasonable.

“I’d like to have frequent updates on the progress of your work with the notebook,” she said.

Will internally gawked at her. He hadn’t even thought of asking for something like that. This was why lawyers were amazing.

Kramer looked like he had just eaten a lemon, but was trying not to show his distaste.

“Of course,” he said politely, though tense.

Catherine smiled and nodded genially.

Will finished his transcription and slid the notebook and laptop across the desk to Kramer. The agent seemed pleased Will had finished so quickly, but Will thought he was also disappointed he didn’t have more time to ask Will questions.

Honestly, Will hadn't had the notebook for very long, so there hadn't been enough notes in it to take very long. He had known that. He had known it wouldn't take long. He knew Kramer probably thought it was strange he wanted it so desperately when it contained so little of his work.

But he wasn't going to try explaining himself to the man. Not only would Kramer likely not understand, but Will felt he would be making himself too vulnerable in saying it. How could he tell a man like this that knowing someone had thought of him and felt enough affection for him that they then acted on it, that they knew him well enough to know he would appreciate a notebook above any other gifts, that someone had understood him well enough to know the kind of notebook he would like. All of these things compounded to make the notebook significant, all on its own.

And then there was the fact that Hannibal had given it to him. Before they had even really gotten to know each other. Before Will had accepted the part of Hannibal most would reject. It was a gift from a serial killer, because they loved Will's work and were inspired by him. It was a token of that inspiration and dedication.

Kramer wouldn't understand, and he didn't deserve an explanation regardless.

Will stood, and Catherine and Kramer both followed.

"I apologize for the actions of Agent Crawford," Kramer said, reaching out to shake Will's hand professionally, "I hope you can understand how a job with these stress levels can wear on a man. That's no excuse, but I hope you won't judge him too harshly."

Will smiled and shook the man's hand, though he had no real desire to touch him.

"Jack Crawford is not the only one at fault," he replied pleasantly, "he should not have been permitted to carry on in the way he did for so long."

Kramer scowled, clearly picking up on the implications of what Will was saying.

"Do you mean you hold the entire bureau responsible for what he did?" he asked.

Will kept his smile, wanting to leave. But he also wanted to make his feelings clear on this matter.

"The FBI is probably the most powerful agency in this country," he said, "In that capacity, no one should be allowed to abuse that authority. It doesn't inspire confidence."

Kramer set his jaw and nodded. Will was impressed by his restraint. If Jack had been in his position, he would have argued with Will. They had clearly chosen Kramer carefully.

Will might be able to work with him.

"Thank you for your time, Mister Graham," Kramer said, admirably civil when it was clear he wanted to verbally flay him.

Will wondered if he would have held back so much without Catherine being present. He doubted it, but he was curious. Will wondered when he would have the chance to properly thank Beverly for setting him up with a competent lawyer.

“I don’t suppose you’ll be open to any more interviews in the near future?” Kramer asked as he held the door open for the both of them. He looked cautiously hopeful.

Will shrugged.

“I don’t think that’s very likely,” he answered, “I’ve already told the FBI everything I can. If it wasn’t helpful to this point, I doubt I can offer anything else of value. I would suggest you look somewhere else.”

Kramer nodded in understanding, and let them leave.

“How did you know I want the notebook back?” Will asked once he and Catherine were out in the parking lot.

Catherine smiled.

“I didn’t,” she said, “not entirely. It is indeed a very nice notebook, and it has your name embossed on the cover. Anyone would be unhappy to lose it, and you make good use of your notebooks, clearly, so I made an educated guess. Additionally, it doesn’t hurt to put a little pressure on them. You know I enjoy making them squirm a bit.”

Will grinned.

“I appreciate all you do,” he said, “when this is all over, I’ll invite you to dinner.”

Hannibal wouldn’t mind. He had already expressed his own appreciation for Catherine and her competency.

Catherine’s smile widened.

“I look forward to it,” she said.

Will drove back to his house. He didn’t have to stay with Hannibal, because Tobias was dead, and Will wasn’t worried about any serial killers anymore.

When Will opened the door of his little house in the woods, he could smell fresh coffee and hear Hannibal moving around in the kitchen. Will smiled to himself, wondering if this was how Hannibal had felt when he got home from work to find Will waiting for him these past days. If so, he was glad. It was nice to know there was someone there he actually wanted to see.

Will turned to toss his keys onto the table by the door, and stopped, a grin spreading across his face.

There was a stack of new notebooks.

51

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Hannibal heard Will come in, and he smiled. He wondered if Will would feel uncomfortable coming home to someone else being in his house which was so often empty. He hoped not, but he was sure he would find out soon enough.

Hannibal poured a mug of coffee for Will, hearing Will pause as he must have noticed the stack of notebooks. Hannibal had meant it entirely when he promised he would buy Will as many notebooks as he wanted. He had gone out this morning and picked up several exactly like the one he had given Will before. Will had said it was exactly the kind he liked, that every part of it had been to the specifics that he liked.

When Hannibal turned around, he was immediately pulled into a kiss.

Hannibal was startled by Will, and a bit of coffee sloshed out of the mug, splashing onto the floor by their feet.

“Sorry,” Will said, grinning widely. He was holding one of the notebooks in his hand.

Hannibal shook his head.

“Nonsense. You needn’t apologize. I see you noticed the notebooks.”

Will pulled away and snagged a towel from a drawer, setting to work cleaning up the spill.

“Just sorry for startling you,” he said, “but yeah, I saw the notebooks. I love them. You’re gonna have to tell me where you get them. I’ve never seen notebooks this perfect.”

Hannibal grinned and pressed the mug into Will’s hands. He had no intention of telling Will. He wanted to provide the notebooks for him, and didn’t want Will to be able to get them without him. It was one selfish thing he was going to keep for himself.

“I could ask for nothing more than to please you,” he said.

Will rolled his eyes and sipped his coffee. He hummed in appreciation and took Hannibal’s hand. He pulled him back to the front living area.

“I feel like I’m pretty easy to please,” Will said, setting his mug on his desk and pushing Hannibal down into the chair by the window, “So you could ask for a lot more.”

Will climbed up so he was straddling Hannibal’s lap, holding Hannibal’s face in his hands. Hannibal gripped Will’s hips, staring up at Will with a growing amazement in his chest. Will kissed him, like he was starving, and Hannibal matched him.

“I do not want anything else,” he said, feeling as if it was the only truth in the world that mattered.

Will grinned, and Hannibal kissed his neck.

Will was draped over the chair in Hannibal’s office, his new notebook propped in his lap as he wrote. Hannibal was at his desk, probably drawing Will. Hannibal had kept Will’s hour open for him, even though Will wasn’t paying for the sessions. It was like scheduled time for them to spend together. Will loved it.

Will thought of something, pausing and turning to look at Hannibal. Hannibal lifted his eyes to meet Will’s gaze, smiling warmly as he always did.

“Are you planning to do any more scenes from my books?” Will asked.

Hannibal set his pencil down and folded his hands together on top of his desk.

“I had not decided,” he said, “Their purpose has been served, so they are no longer necessary, but I do find them uniquely elegant in design, and I very much enjoyed them.”

Will nodded. He had already known all that.

“If they stop suddenly, that could look suspicious. Do one more, and wrap it all up. There’s something I need to talk to Agent Kramer about, but I think it’s about time to finish this.”

Hannibal stood and walked over to where Will was sitting. He knelt down beside him, propping his elbow on the armrests of the chair by Will’s thigh and shoulder. If Will hadn’t known absolutely how Hannibal felt about him, this position would have made him feel trapped and frightened.

But all he could think about was how handsome Hannibal was, and the way the light made his eyes shine like molten gold.

“Will you come away with me?” Hannibal asked, “To Florence. To Paris. Anywhere you want, for as long as you want.”

Will smiled. He thought that sounded fun, as long as Hannibal was with him.

“When all of this is over, of course I will,” he said, “I trust you.”

Hannibal kissed him, and Will was happy.

—

“Will Graham.”

“Guess who finally got sprung.”

Will couldn't hold back a wide grin. He stood up with the phone and began to walk around the house, grinning and pleased.

"Bev," he said, "You're allowed to talk to me now? Did Kramer finally realize I'm not a psycho killer?"

Beverly laughed, and it made Will happy. He had missed her. Even though he had been busy with Hannibal, and happy with him, he had missed being able to talk to her and the periodical check-ins she insisted on doing to make sure he hadn't starved himself.

"Nope. He's as suspicious and unhappy with you as Jack was. But he kicked me off the case instead of putting me under office arrest."

Will was disappointed, but not surprised. The FBI had a particular way of working, and he hadn't expected that to change because a new agent had been assigned to the case.

"So, you can come over for dinner?" he asked, "Hannibal is a great cook, and I'm sure he'd love to have you."

Beverly hummed, and Will could picture her flipping through an empty calendar, pretending to be busy.

"I have another case to work on, but set the date and I'll be there. Without Jack over my shoulder, I have more free time."

Will couldn't stop grinning. He was excited to see her. He stood up and walked to the front of the house, peeking out the window to see what the weather was like.

That was when he saw her for the first time, and his breath caught in his throat. She was beautiful.

"I have to go," Will said, and ended the call with Beverly.

Will rushed out the front door, hoping she wouldn't run away from him.

She was a springer spaniel, or at least mostly springer, with dark brown and white fur. She was matted and dirty, and had a slight limp in her back left paw, she had clearly been out for a while, lost in the woods. But she was beautiful.

Will crouched by the steps of the porch, not wanting to frighten her. If she took off into the trees he would have a hard time tracking her back down.

Will held out his hand to her, wishing he had stopped to grab some food from the kitchen before rushing out here.

"Come here," he said softly to her, hoping she would be able to tell he meant her no harm, "come here, sweet thing. Let's get you cleaned up."

To his surprise and delight, the dog slowly crept closer. She was hesitant, possibly having been hurt by other people or animals while she had been lost. Will stayed still, quiet and

welcoming.

At length, she walked up and sniffed his hand. Will turned his hand and slowly stroked through the fur by her ear. Her tail gave a few happy wags, and Will smiled.

Will managed to coax her inside, and he found some food to give her. She ate enthusiastically, and Will could she she had grown thin while she had been lost. He wondered how long that had been.

Will spent the rest of the day cleaning her and checking her over for injuries or sign of illness. As far as he could tell, she wasn't sick. She was a bit malnourished, and her back leg was hurt, but she was otherwise fine.

She was gentle and friendly, clearly having been someone's pet before now. She curled up next to Will when he sat on the floor with her, and she let out a contented sigh.

It was late, and Will was glad she wasn't having to spend another night out on her own. She wasn't meant for that life. She was no wolf or coyote.

He would take her to a vet tomorrow, get her leg taken care of and see if she had a chip. For tonight, she was his, and they could keep each other company. He thought he might keep her, if she didn't end up going to whatever family had lost her. He thought it more likely than not they had left her out here, abandoned her. People did that, especially with dogs they didn't have room for. She was young, might have been bought as a puppy, and Springers need space. He could imagine a family had bitten off more than they could chew, and had decided this was easier than handing her over to a shelter.

A part of him hoped no owners would be found. He felt he could actually care for her if he had the chance. He was doing better now, and Hannibal was helping to keep him on track with his schedule.

Now that she was cleaned up, she even looked nice enough to not really clash with Hannibal's pretentious style. She really was a beautiful dog.

If he could keep her, he would need to think of a name for her.

Chapter End Notes

I'm still working on names for the dog, so feel free to suggest any ideas you may have. I reserve the right to not use one suggested, but I might if it strikes my fancy. XD
Thanks for reading <3

52

Hannibal watched as Will considered different collars and leashes for his new companion.

Hannibal could see how pleased and excited Will was about the dog. She was beautiful, and Hannibal was almost equally enchanted with her. He was already making mental notes to arrange for her to go with them to Italy.

Will had tentatively named the dog Andromache, though he said he might change it if he thought of something better.

“Andy doesn’t seem too malnourished,” Will said, “so she wasn’t wandering for too long. I’m glad she found her way to me when she did.”

Hannibal agreed, pleased to see Will so happy, though he wished he was the cause.

After all these years considering himself untouchable, Hannibal was envious of a dog.

Hannibal was considering this odd turn of fate when a young woman approached them. She didn’t look like she could be more than fifteen, small and delicate as she was. Hannibal would be surprised if she was even fourteen.

“Will Graham,” she said, her voice shaking with emotion.

Will frowned and turned to face the girl. She looked tired as if she had lived many years more than her share, dark circles under her eyes and a haunted look about her.

“Yes?” Will asked, confused.

Hannibal thought he saw a flicker of recognition in Will’s face, though he couldn’t be sure.

The girl took in a shaky breath, her chin quivering like a toddler that had been hurt but didn’t want to cry.

“You killed my aunt Cassie,” she said, her voice cracking.

Will paled, and now it was unmistakable that Will knew who this girl was. Hannibal wondered who she was, and what she meant. Who her Aunt had been.

“Lily,” Will said, almost as if he didn’t believe it, “I’m sorry about your aunt, but I didn’t kill her.”

Lily let out a strangled sound of grief, shifting on her feet as if she couldn’t decide between running away or lunging at Will. Her hands flexed at her sides.

“Maybe you didn’t do it yourself, but you’re the reason she’s dead,” she said, tears spilling from her eyes, “I’ve read all of your books. I recognized it the moment I saw the picture. You wrote it, and it happened to her. It’s your fault.”

Will was pale and looked nearly sick. Hannibal stepped forward, feeling he had to intervene at this point.

“Miss Lily, Will has not done anything to your aunt. You cannot blame him. Please, this is not the place or time.”

Lily turned on him, then, her eyes bright with fury. Hannibal recognized the intense sorrow there, under the anger. He knew how it felt.

“Until they catch the son of a bitch who did it, I can and will blame him,” she said, her voice growing louder, but not shrill as he would have expected, “I’m not stupid, Doctor Lecter, and I know she was killed to get his attention.”

Lily turned back to Will, hate emanating from her every pore. Hannibal could see Will falling into his mind at the onslaught of negative emotion.

“I hope they finally kill you,” she said, “these things escalate, and I hope they kill you before they’re caught.”

A man walked up, his eyes that matched the girl’s, with dark shadows underneath.

“I’m sorry,” he said, sounding as tired as he looked, “she’s not feeling-”

The man stopped when he looked at Will, looking as if his entire brain was rebooting. Then, he continued as if he had never stopped.

“-very well. She’s upset. I’ll just take her home and let you get back to shopping. I’m sorry.”

The man put a hand on Lily’s arm and began pulling. The girl was small, barely five feet tall, but she fought him. She flopped her arm around, trying to break his grip, and cursed at him. The man was clearly growing numb to her acting out like this, and didn’t react to any of it, letting his own arm be jerked around without breaking his hold.

“He killed aunt Cassie,” the girl shouted at him, pointing at Will, “he’s the reason she’s dead. I want him to pay for it. I want him to be killed like she was.”

The man shot them another apologetic look, but managed to start pulling the girl away. The man pulled her right out of the store, against her protests and fighting all the way.

Hannibal was frustrated. He was not happy that she had spoken to Will that way, but she was only a child, and she was clearly mourning. There wasn’t anything he could do about it.

The rest of their time in the shop, Will was silent, his head down and his expression sad and thoughtful. Hannibal tried to talk to him, make idle talk and distract him from what had happened. Will was clearly upset, and refused to accept the offer of a distraction.

Hannibal finally brought it up once they were in the car on the way back.

“You did not kill that woman,” he said carefully.

Will was staring out the window, his expression distant.

“I know,” he said, “Tobias.”

Hannibal considered for a moment. He knew which scene the woman had been, in that case. He understood why it would be so hard on her family. She would not have done anything to earn it. She must have had some connection to Will.

“It is not your fault she is dead, either,” he added.

“I know,” Will said again, “but it’s yours.”

Hannibal was stunned. He hadn’t expected that of Will. Will hadn’t expressed any objection to Hannibal’s activities since he had learned the extent of them, nor had he ever blamed one person’s actions on anyone else. It was strange that he would do so now.

“I did not kill her, Will,” Hannibal said firmly, “you know that. Tobias did.”

Will turned and looked at Hannibal, his expression set and angry.

“He did it to get to you, because you were trying to get to me. If he wanted to get to you, without your stupid games, he wouldn’t have targeted someone connected to me. If you hadn’t started this whole thing, she wouldn’t have been killed.”

Hannibal frowned.

“I am not responsible for the actions of Tobias Budge,” he said, “and you know very well that I am not. I punished him for what he did. What more would you have me do?”

Will turned away again and didn’t answer. The rest of the drive was spent in silence, though it was not one of the comfortable silences they had grown used to. Hannibal was unhappy with how things were going. Will seemed upset over something neither of them could change, and that was a dangerous place for them to be.

They entered Will’s house with the new supplies for Andromache, and the dog yipped happily at their return. Will smiled again and petted her, beginning to unpack their purchases and show each of them to his friend. Hannibal did his best to not show his apprehension, putting away the items he thought it unlikely Will would want just then.

“If I asked you to turn yourself in, would you?” Will asked, without preamble.

Hannibal stilled, then turned to face Will.

Will was not looking at him, preoccupied as he was with his dog. He was purposefully avoiding eye contact, and Hannibal wondered if this was truly a step backward they were taking right now. He would be disappointed, but he had every faith he could bring them back out of it.

“Do you truly want that?” Hannibal asked instead of answering.

Will was silent for another moment, stroking his hands through Andromache's fur. His expression was blank in the way he did when he didn't want Hannibal to know what he was thinking. It was frustratingly effective, and Hannibal had no idea what to expect from him.

"You didn't answer my question," Will said at last, apparently refusing to give his own answer until Hannibal had given his.

Hannibal sighed softly.

"I will do anything in my power to make you happy, Will," he said, "anything I think you want, I will give you. If I thought it is what you truly wanted, I would allow myself to be caught and captured. For you, I would do anything."

Will looked up, then, but his expression was still blank, and Hannibal didn't know what he was thinking.

"I do not believe you want that, and you have yet to convince me," he finished.

Will's face broke, and he closed his eyes. He looked distraught, and Hannibal felt his heart ache to go to him. He didn't think Will would let him, though.

"It's not fair," Will said sharply, "it's not fair that she's dead, and that girl has to suffer because of me. I never asked for any of this. I didn't want to hurt someone like her."

Hannibal frowned.

"Will," he said softly, "you know it's not your fault. You cannot blame yourself for it."

Tears spilled from Will's eyes, and he gripped his hair as if he meant to tear it out.

"Don't kill that girl. She was rude to me, but don't kill her."

Hannibal pursed his lips.

"She is a child," he said, offended Will would think he would do something so cruel and unfeeling.

Will let out a shrill laugh, nearly hysterical.

"Oh, so now you have a moral code?" he snapped.

Hannibal furrowed his brow.

Will was upset. That was clear, but Hannibal hadn't expected him to be cruel. Will knew Hannibal better than anyone, sometimes better than Hannibal knew himself. He knew very well that Hannibal was particular about his prey, and knew the girl had never been in danger from Hannibal.

"Would you like me to leave?" Hannibal asked, thinking Will might need some time alone until he could figure out what he was feeling and how to handle it.

Will’s hands left his hair and at once he had come to Hannibal, curling his fingers into the lapels of his suit.

“No,” Will said quickly, “don’t. Please. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean it. I don’t know what I’m feeling or what I’m doing. I’ll go crazy if you leave me alone right now.”

Hannibal pressed a kiss to Will’s forehead, sighing softly. Despite Will’s sharp tongue and defensive cruelty, Hannibal still loved him very much. He couldn’t refuse him when he wanted something, and was asking for it so sweetly.

“You are upset,” Hannibal said, “understandably so. Will you tell me who she is? I understand she had some connection to you, and that was why she was targeted.”

Will nodded, his head bumping against Hannibal’s shoulder.

“She was a librarian,” he said softly, nearly inaudibly, “that day of my book signing. God. It feels like that was so long ago. That day you watched me, and Beverly was there. After everyone left, and I was leaving, she asked me to sign a book for her niece. Lily. That girl at the store. Tobias killed her, because he knew I would recognize her. The book I signed for Lily was the one he left at your scene.”

Hannibal understood, now. What Tobias had done was reckless and thoughtless. He had caused Will to suffer, and was still doing so after he was dead. If Hannibal could have killed him again, he would have done so in a heartbeat. And it would not have been quick or painless.

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“I want to kill Freddie Lounds.”

Hannibal looked up from his sketch, where Will and Andromache were coming into shape. Will continued brushing the dog’s soft and silky fur, either unaware of or choosing not to react to Hannibal’s curious gaze.

“That will be dangerous,” Hannibal said carefully, “You will be high on the list of suspects.”

Will nodded as if he had been expecting that. He likely had been, as Hannibal expected he had already considered it.

“We have to make it good. Lucky for me, I have a good lawyer and a fantastic alibi.”

Will flashed a grin at Hannibal, making him smile without even thinking about it first.

“I may not be as strong an alibi as you would like to think,” he warned, “the mere fact that I met you under professional circumstances and we are now in a relationship corrupts my character. That is without considering that I did nothing to endear myself to Jack Crawford.”

Amusement flickered over Will’s features.

“Honestly, I don’t think that will be much of a problem for Agent Kramer,” he said, “at this point, he’s trying to do everything opposing Jack. You can turn on the charm this time, and have him in your pocket like everyone else.”

Hannibal, as always, was flattered that Will thought him worthy of praise, even as exaggerated as it may be. Will rarely wasted breath on compliments.

“And your plan will fit with Miss Lounds as the victim?” he asked, “or are we to separate them?”

Will grinned, flashing his teeth.

“Oh, Freddie Lounds will do wonderfully for our scene,” he said, “all I have left to do is plant some seeds, and we can get started.”

Hannibal nodded and returned to his sketch. Andromache was beginning to doze under Will’s gentle ministrations, and again Hannibal felt a pang of jealousy towards the poor creature.

He would have to get used to sharing Will, as little as he liked the idea.

Hannibal wondered how Will would perform when the time came. He had no concern about the acting Will would have to do before the main event. He had already proven he was quite adept at manipulation. It was the actual killing he was curious about. The part Will had never actually done other than in his mind.

Hannibal was sure Will would not shrink away, and he had every faith Will would be entirely capable, if unpracticed. What he was curious about was Will's mind, of course. He wondered how Will would react mentally to becoming a killer. Would his nightmares get worse? Would they get better? Would he loathe himself or Hannibal? Would he decide it wasn't actually for him and refrain from killing ever again?

Hannibal expected Will would be insatiable in his bloodlust, at least to some degree. There was a cruel righteousness within him that would cry out for more after the initial taste. If he was right, the degree of Will's hunger was still variable.

And even with all his intuition and guidance, Hannibal could still not entirely predict him.

—

Chilton had been calling Will. Not very frequently, but enough that Hannibal was annoyed more than ever by the man. Hannibal didn't complain, knowing it was part of Will's plan, and was necessary, but he wished Will wouldn't talk to him. Will was taking complete control of this, and Hannibal wouldn't dream of discouraging him. It was Will's first kill, and it was important to let him do it the way he wanted.

Hannibal mourned the fact that Will would never be given credit for the scene they had planned. They would make it similar enough to hannibal's that it would be easily lumped in with them. No one would know about the beautiful creature being born.

Will was clearly anxious to act, but admirably kept his head. He was a vicious, violent thing, but not stupid.

The time was growing near, though. Will would not have to wait much longer.

"You think the FBI will let me leave the country?" Will asked, referring to their planned trip to Italy when this was all over.

Hannibal smiled, amused at the idea of Agent Kramer trying to tell Will he had to stay in the country because there was a killer fixated on him. He thought Will's retort would be wonderful, and hoped he would be able to see it if the situation ever came to pass.

"I think Catherine can convince them to allow it" he said, "are you worried?"

Will thought about it, one hand between Andromache's ears and the other busily writing in one of his new notebooks. He rarely wrote as feverishly as he used to, and Hannibal wondered why that was. He liked to flatter himself with the idea that Will found life more interesting now, and had less reason to hide in his imagination. He wouldn't assume that was the truth, but he enjoyed the thought.

Will's nightmares had almost entirely disappeared as well. If he did wake from a dream in the night, he most often turned to look at Hannibal in the dark, then pulled close and clung to him in the bed. The action was not desperate or afraid, but rather possessive. Hannibal never asked what he dreamed of, but sometimes Will would tell him anyway.

“No,” Will answered, “I’m not worried.” He flashed a grin at Hannibal. “Funny. I was always worried about everything, but now that I’m planning a murder, I feel fine.”

Hannibal returned the smile, a warm glow of affection in his chest. He was pleased Will found his peace in the hunt, as Hannibal did. Like he had slotted into the place the universe had carved for him.

“I’m pleased to hear it,” Hannibal said, “If not worry, what do you feel in regards to the plan?”

Hannibal knew how Will felt. He didn’t have to ask. But he basked in the way Will’s eyes darkened when he talked about it.

Will looked up at Hannibal, his lips pulled in a knowing smile. Despite knowing very well what Hannibal was after, he couldn’t stop his eyes from dilating, turning his irises to slivers of blue around the fathomless dark of his pupils. Hannibal felt his skin erupt with goosebumps under that gaze, and he nearly held his breath as Will set down his pen.

“I’m excited,” Will said, his voice low and serious, “after all these years doing no more than dreaming, I feel as if I’ve finally woken up. I feel alive, and I expect you to be there with me every step of the way. If you aren’t, I just might kill you.”

Hannibal couldn’t suppress a shiver, more pleased by Will’s tone and words than by anything else in the world.

“I would let you.”

Will flashed his teeth in another grin. Hannibal could imagine him, spattered in blood and grinning that same grin. He would be glorious.

“You’re no fun,” Will said, “If I were to kill you, I’d want you to put up a fight.”

Hannibal stood and walked to Will, giving him a kiss and a smile.

“Then I would struggle,” he said, “only so I might please you.”

Will took hold of Hannibal’s tie and held him there, bent down so their faces were only a breath apart. Will’s lashes fluttered, either intentionally or not, and he spoke.

“I used to find you so unpredictable,” Will whispered, his lips brushing Hannibal’s, “but now I always know what to expect. You’ll do anything to please me, because that’s what pleases you.”

Hannibal closed the distance between them, kissing Will fervently without a care the the awkward position of his body. Will must have noticed, though, and taken mercy on him, because he set aside the notebook and pulled at Hannibal’s thighs so his knees bent. This left Hannibal nearly straddling Will’s lap on the couch, making Andromache hop down and patter away. The sound of her retreat seemed to spur Will into action. He hooked one leg behind Hannibal’s and in one fluid motion had flipped Hannibal onto his back on the couch.

Hannibal opened his mouth to object to the fur that would now be clinging to his clothes, but Will was above him and grinning that feral grin of his and Hannibal could not find the words.

“I want Freddie to know,” Will said, “I want her to be afraid.”

Hannibal could have objected to that as well, saying the fear would make her bitter. But the thought didn’t even cross his mind in that moment. He was entirely overcome with the concept of Will stalking his prey like a hunter, and taking her life after she saw the truth of him.

Freddie didn’t deserve to be a witness to Will’s becoming, but she would do excellently as a baptism. Hannibal had never loved Will more.

Will gripped Hannibal’s hair and pulled him into a devouring kiss. Talking was finished, and Hannibal let Will have complete control in the moment.

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Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Will pulled the stitch taut, his gloved hand coming up to his shoulder. Freddie stared up at him with wide, pleading eyes. Hannibal had helpfully given her something that kept her immobile and silent, but she was completely aware and she could feel what was happening. It was perfect for what Will wanted.

“I wonder if you were starting to think you had all misjudged me,” Will mused, beginning another stitch through her soft flesh, “when you first said I was a killer.”

Tears spilled over from Freddie’s eyes, streaming down her face and into her tightly curled hair. Will wondered if it was more from fear or pain, that she was crying. He supposed it didn’t matter much, either one was good to him, but he was curious what had finally gotten through that stone cold bitch facade of hers.

“The funny part is, I *wasn’t* a killer then,” Will told her, furrowing his brow a bit as he focused on the work, “Technically, I’m still not. Not until your delicate little heart stops beating for good. I’ve really just been writing about death all my life, without having all that much experience in the matter.”

Will huffed a laugh to himself.

“I wonder if my writing will get better after this.”

Freddie didn’t seem to find that as funny as he did, but that wasn’t a surprise.

“The point is,” Will continued, tying off the row of stitches and smiling at his work, “You were wrong, but you were also right. I wasn’t a killer then, but I’ve always had it in me to be one. I just needed the proper motivation.”

Freddie’s eyes were bright with understanding and fear, and Will felt his heart beating faster with the thrill. He could see his vision coming together, and it was a godlike feeling. He wondered if Hannibal felt this way when he was creating the scenes of death and beauty he was so familiar with. If so, Will wondered how Hannibal could ever survive without it.

“You’re a real bitch, you know that?” Will asked.

Freddie couldn’t answer, but Will nodded as if she had.

“You made everyone sure it was all my fault, all those people dying. You covered the whole case in a way that blamed me for everyone’s deaths. You convinced a little girl that I killed her aunt.”

Will snarled at Freddie, still stung by that entire situation.

"I didn't kill her, and neither did my admirer. The man who killed her did it to hurt me and get the attention of the one who had been getting my attention with the others. My admirer killed him as a gift for me. Tobias Budge. The one who was consumed by mushrooms."

Will couldn't help but smile at the memory. It was a much too peaceful an end for him, but Will loved Hannibal for the gesture. He had been so loyal to Will's work.

"You are going to be the last of them," Will said, almost saddened by it, "the last victim molded into a likeness of my works. He'll get the credit, of course, but you're going to be the first of my true masterpieces. The work I should have been doing all this time. What I've been denying myself all my life."

Will sighed, seeing Freddie's eyes dim a bit. The pain was probably sending her into a daze of near unconsciousness. She wouldn't be there with him much longer unless he did something to bring her back.

"You're doing very well."

Will looked up at Hannibal and smiled, feeling a bit shy. This was the first time he had done this, and he was being watched by someone with years of experience. Someone who was fantastically talented.

"I'm almost done," Will said, "when I finish, can you give her something to wake her up? I want her to really feel it."

Hannibal grinned, and it was a feral, wild kind of grin. Will wondered if anyone else had ever seen Hannibal make that expression. If they had, he was sure they were dead now. He was uniquely privileged in that facet.

"A shot of adrenaline should do the trick," Hannibal said calmly, "She has not lost so much blood that she will die of it before then."

Will glanced down at the gash in her abdomen that had been neatly sutured. Hannibal had talked him through the entire thing, hovering over his shoulder as he removed a few select organs. Will had been nearly thrumming with energy, his gloved hands inside a living body, covered in blood. Hannibal's presence had been grounding.

"Good," Will said, "I want her to feel it. All the way to the end. I want her to be afraid."

Hannibal's eyes darkened. Will knew the moment they had the chance, Hannibal would be showing Will just how much he appreciated Will's work. It gave him another thrill, thinking of it, and Will turned back to Freddie to finish his work.

Her eyes had closed, and Will was sure she was unconscious. That was just fine. The last thing he had to do would be easier to do if he didn't have to worry about her eyes being open.

"Almost there," Will breathed to himself, threading the needle once more and preparing.

Will began stitching again.

Hannibal watched as Will heaved, pulling the thick rope that lifted Freddie's body off the ground. The muscles in Will's shoulders and back flexed and rolled under his scrubs, making Hannibal's mouth water with the desire to sink his teeth into the skin there.

This scene was one Hannibal had always puzzled over in Will's book. It had always seemed so frankly appropriate, less fantastical than most of them. Will had confessed to him, in the midst of outlining the plan, that he hadn't conjured it from a dream. He had actually thought it up the first time he had read something written by Freddie Lounds that he had adamantly disagreed with. It had been meant for her from the start.

Freddie's mouth was sewn shut, the stitches thick and black in a crisscross pattern that was similar to what a doll might have as a smile. Likewise, there were large, stitched X's over her eyes, though the eyes themselves had been left undamaged. She was being lifted by strings that attached to each of her limbs like those of a marionette, and suspended from a large crossbar to complete the illusion. Hannibal had guided Will through severing the tendons at each joint, so her limbs would be easily manipulated even once she were conscious and able to try to move again.

Speaking of which, Freddie had been lifted to the right height, so Hannibal stepped forward and administered the shot of adrenaline. The medication he had given to immobilize her had worn off, but she was still unable to move her limbs by herself, because of the surgery. Her eyes flew open, and a muffled sound was trapped behind her sewn shut lips.

Hannibal stepped back, and watched as Will finished hefting her up to the level he wanted her to be. She was poised like a doll in the midst of play, frightened and screaming behind her lips. Only her head swiveled around, allowing her to stare at the large, abandoned warehouse around her. Of course, her vision was slightly obstructed by the thick threads crossed in front of them. The skirt of the black dress puffed out around her legs, making her look almost like a child, delicate and fragile and pale.

She really did look like a doll. Hannibal was impressed with how Will had known before doing it how she would look like this. Most people thought they could imagine things like this, but when the real thing was before their eyes they found their imagination had been severely lacking.

Of course, Hannibal had not doubted Will's imagination at all.

Will secured the rope with a neat and efficient knot, stepping back to admire his work. Hannibal stalked toward him, desperate to sink his hands into Will's soft, dark hair. He wanted to ravish Will, right here and now. He knew he wouldn't, too intelligent and practical as they both were, but it was ever a temptation.

Will turned in time to catch Hannibal and pull him into a kiss before Hannibal could do it himself.

"God, Hannibal," Will said, breathless and thrumming under Hannibal's touch, "it's amazing. It's beautiful. Do you feel this way all the time? How can you stand it? How do you not

explode?”

Hannibal grinned and crushed Will in his arms, inhaling deeply and filling his lungs with the scent of Will. He had never been so happy, and hearing Will call it beautiful was more than he could have ever asked for.

“Feeling powerful will become something you grow used to, Will,” Hannibal said, “it does not become any less wonderful, but it will be less overwhelming. You feel as if your skin cannot contain it, but you will find that it can, and always could. Your skin has never fit before, but now it does. I will show you the most magnificent things.”

Will pressed his face to Hannibal’s neck, his lips ghosting over the pulse there before a hint of his teeth.

“Let’s go home,” Will said, “I want to get out of these scrubs, and into your skin. And staying here is a risk, even though I trust you’ve secured it fabulously.”

Hannibal chuckled. He felt the same way, and he was anxious to get them back. To properly worship Will and make him feel even better than he did now. To magnify his feelings of power and beauty.

“Anything you want,” Hannibal said, and he meant it.

The look Will gave him, the expression of pure adoration and understanding, told Hannibal Will knew he meant it. Will could take advantage of it, could ask Hannibal to do any number of things for his own amusement. Hannibal was sure he would do them, just to please Will.

But as of yet, Will hadn’t taken that opportunity. Will was cruel at times, but he hadn’t taken advantage of Hannibal’s devotion in that way.

Will changed, stowing the scrubs in the trunk with the other items they would have to dispose of, and they made their way home. Will was still thrumming with energy the entire drive, and he was nearly glowing. Hannibal loved him so much. He wanted to sink his teeth into Will and never let go.

He had the feeling Will felt the same way.

Chapter End Notes

Goodbye, Freddie.
Next chapter is a bit more serious than this, so bask in the moment before it's over. XD
<3 <3

55

Chapter Summary

... surprise?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Will turned his phone on and it immediately rang in his hand. He glanced at Hannibal, but Hannibal was watching the road as they grew closer to his home. Will turned back to his phone and saw that it was Beverly. Curious, he answered.

“Will Graham,” he said habitually.

There was no response for a moment, but Will could hear commotion in the background. It sounded busy, and Will wondered what could be happening that Beverly would need to call him about.

“Will,” Beverly said. She sounded upset, and as if she had been crying. “Where are you? I’ve been trying to call.”

Will frowned, worry digging its claws into his chest at the way she sounded.

“I just got to Hannibal’s. My phone was off. Chilton has been calling me a lot and I got sick of it. What’s going on?”

Beverly let out a sound of grief, and Will knew she had been crying. Something was very wrong.

“I was so afraid,” Beverly said, “I thought you were dead. Your house. There was a fire. I couldn’t get a hold of you.”

Will’s blood turned cold and he put a hand on Hannibal’s shoulder to both get his attention and ground himself.

“A fire?” he echoed, “at my house? Bev, tell me what’s going on.”

Hannibal changed route immediately, taking them towards Will’s house instead of his own. Their speed increased, and Will saw the knuckles of Hannibal’s hands turn white around the steering wheel.

“I don’t know everything yet,” Beverly said, forcing herself to regain a level of composure, “But they think it was on purpose. They’re saying it looks like arson. Someone tried to hurt

or kill you. I thought you were dead."

Will dug his nails into the palms of his hands, knowing they were too short to make himself bleed that way, but wanting to feel the pain anyway. He could see Hannibal's anger and concern at war in the other man's posture and expression.

Good thing Andy had been at Hannibal's today.

"I'm alright, Bev," Will said, needing to help his friend despite not being there with her, "I'm coming. Are you at the house?"

Beverly sniffled, and Will's chest lurched at her pain.

"Yeah. I'm still here. I told them I wouldn't leave until I found you. God. I thought you were dead."

Will hated to hear her so afraid and upset. She didn't deserve that, and it was her pain he cared about in that moment, more than the thought of his home and belongings.

"I'm on my way," Will reiterated, "I'll be there as soon as I can. I'm alright. Take a breath and try to calm down. It's going to be alright."

Beverly gave him a tense and stricken agreement, and got off the phone. Will put the phone into his pocket and closed his eyes, taking a long, deep breath.

Will let out the breath in a loud stream of curses, and he wished he had something to take out his anger on. He was upset he had already killed Freddie, because he wanted to tear something apart with his teeth. He didn't care about making a scene look right to have it be contributed to the already established string of murders. He just wanted to feel the flesh between his teeth and the blood on his hands.

His house. His home. His sanctuary. Everything he had worked all these years to build for himself. Put in danger by some idiot with a match or something like it. Someone who wanted to hurt Will.

Beverly had been right about that, but Will knew it was highly unlikely they had wanted to kill Will. It would have been easy to make sure he was home, and it would have been more pragmatic to ensure he didn't get out while the house burned. No, if this person had wanted to kill him, they could have done a better job of trying.

A part of him felt that he was dying anyway. He didn't know how much he had really lost, but he felt the loss already. He had things he didn't want to lose. Things that would be damaged by not only fire, but water when the fire was put out.

His notebooks. Nearly a life's worth of writing, all carefully preserved on the shelf where he kept them, documenting his journey through his own mind. They weren't likely to have survived. They were the most significant loss, to Will, but they were not alone.

Will had carefully selected items that he liked to have, and only brought those into his home. Every piece of furniture and tool in his house had been picked because it had felt like home

to him. Whoever had done this had known it would hurt, and it did.

“Will, I’m sorry,” Hannibal said, and he sounded nearly as devastated as Will felt, “I will help you get through this in any way I can.”

Will nodded numbly, not pulling away when one of Hannibal’s hands took his and squeezed it gently.

The good mood of the day had shattered.

Will’s face was already covered in tears by the time Hannibal pulled the car up as near to the house as he was allowed.

The structure was still standing, giving Hannibal some hope there was a chance some things may be salvaged. There was clear damage, though, and he thought it very fortunate the blaze had not become a full forest fire. All the trees nearest to the house were scorched and blackened, but it must not have been allowed to spread any further than that.

Hannibal stored that away for future use, knowing he would do anything within his power to punish the person who had done this.

Will was out of the car, hugging Beverly and crying. Hannibal didn’t begrudge her this. Now was not the time for jealousy.

“I’m so sorry, Will,” Beverly said, holding him tightly.

Will shook his head, sniffling.

“I’m glad Andy and I weren’t here when it happened,” he said, “It could have been a lot worse.”

Beverly smiled sadly, rightly thinking Will was hiding most of his hurt for the time being. Hannibal was grateful to her for being there for Will, even though he was compelled to make himself the only thing Will wanted or needed. He wanted to be Will’s everything, but he knew that wasn’t possible now. Will knew him too well, and wouldn’t allow the kind of manipulation it would take to achieve it.

Perhaps, had things been different from the start, Hannibal might have done it. In this universe, it was too late.

Beverly looked at Hannibal and offered a sad smile.

“Hi,” she said, “I don’t think we’ve really seen each other since you and Will got together. I wish this meeting was happening under better circumstances.”

Hannibal nodded, glancing sorrowfully at the charred skeleton of Will’s home.

“I am sorry these circumstances are relevant at all,” he said, “but I am grateful Will was not physically harmed from it.”

Will pulled away from Beverly, clearly feeling better from having her there. That did spark some jealousy in Hannibal, but he pushed it away. Now was not the time.

“Are we allowed to go up and see the damage?” Will asked.

Beverly shrugged.

“Let’s ask the guy in charge,” she said, and began leading them to a group of men near the site.

Hannibal fell back, allowing Beverly and Will to speak with the firemen, asking if they were allowed to approach the remains. Hannibal knew they would not be allowed to. The fire was too recent, and too drastic. They couldn’t be sure the blaze was entirely extinguished, and even then it was likely Will would only be allowed to send professionals into the structure to retrieve his belongings if they were to be saved.

Hannibal cast his eyes around for anything that could help him find the person responsible for this devastation. They would suffer far more than Freddie Lounds had, and Hannibal would not let them find peace until Will was satisfied they had atoned.

Hannibal would have to be careful, though. Will was in a delicate place at the moment. The shock and mourning of this would put him off balance, and the progress they had made towards his true becoming could be snatched back if Hannibal pushed too hard. He would have to carefully feel around how much participation Will wanted with this project. If he did everything for Will, it could be harmful, but pushing Will to do too much could be just as much so. It would be tedious, but Hannibal was a patient man, and he knew he would be able to do what needed to be done.

He would do anything for Will.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry it took me so long to finish this chapter. Part of it was research, because these days it's so much harder to research arson than it used to be. Part of it was me getting distracted writing Heaven's Rage. Most of it was just pure negligence, because I'm a bad fic parent. Sorry.

Hope you enjoyed this chapter. Or were devastated by it. Or hate me now. Or a combination of those. Just whatever.
Thanks for reading <3

56

Chapter Summary

A little treat for our killer boy

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Will ran until he couldn't breathe and his lungs were burning. Andy panted beside him, grinning and happy to be getting the exercise. Will bent at the waist and set his hands on his knees, gasping for air.

It had been a long time since he had felt this way, and he wished he didn't now. He wanted to keep running until he didn't feel anything anymore.

The fire had entirely consumed his shelves of notebooks. His typewriter and record player had gone up as well. It had been a very targeted attack, starting just next to the window he liked to sit in to write, as well as in his bedroom at the bookshelf where he kept his notebooks. Both places where Hannibal had sat to spend time with him.

Someone had known how to hurt him without ever touching him. Someone had broken through the windows and started the fire in two places. They had known exactly what would hurt Will the most. They had destroyed the things that he had been carefully collecting all his adult life. His home. His feeling of safety. Everything he had cared about.

If it weren't for Hannibal, he wouldn't have anything left right now. Because of Hannibal, his laptop and Andromache had been safely away from the blaze. And Hannibal himself was something Will could hold onto.

Will wasn't alone in this.

Beverly knew he was hurting, but didn't know the degree to which his rage went. She didn't know that he felt like he was on fire, and he needed to spread the blaze to feel any relief. She didn't know he felt as if his teeth could bite through steel if it came in the way of his revenge. Beverly was a good friend, but she didn't know the half of what Will was going through right now.

Hannibal was it. Hannibal was the only one who understood, and was helping Will.

Will armed sweat off his forehead and straightened his spine. Andy was grinning up at him, waiting for them to continue with their run.

With another deep breath, Will began to run.

Hannibal heard the door when Will returned. It was something Will had taken to in the days since the fire. He would go out and run until he nearly collapsed from the strain. He had begun losing weight, burning far more calories than he was taking in, even though Hannibal had been trying to feed him enough. The only truly good thing from this all was that Andromache was getting plenty of exercise. She was happy.

Hannibal smiled, knowing today Will might begin to recover truly from the shock of the fire. If Hannibal was right.

"Will, I'm in the kitchen," he called, though he knew Will had probably already known where to find him.

Will didn't answer, heading directly up to the bedroom. Hannibal sighed softly, knowing Will was going to shower before he made any kind of appearance. Will took long showers now, and Hannibal had an idea he was dissociating. Will was distant, and Hannibal was anxious to fix this as much as he could.

A moan came up from the basement, which Hannibal had left open. He intended to let Will do what he may with this particular subject. They had earned a punishment of biblical proportions for what they had done.

It had taken some intense searching on Hannibal's part, and more than a little illegal access to reports he should not have been looking at, but he had tracked down the man who had hurt Will.

From what he could tell, this man had been unrelated to any of Hannibal's victims, or Tobias' for that matter. He had seen himself as a vigilante. Before the fire, he had written social media posts that loudly denounced Will as an author and human being, claiming he was a monster for writing the things he did, and encouraging such actions as Hannibal and Tobias had taken. He had been a proponent of stalking and harming Will, and had been kicked off of a few sites when he had attempted to doxx him. How he had discovered Will's home address, Hannibal was still unsure, but he had all the time in the world to deal with that later.

A warrior of the most foolish and unpleasant kind, this man. He had been calling others to action until he realized he had no support and would have to act, himself, if he wanted anything done.

He was a fool, thinking he could get away with this. Hannibal would never allow such disrespect and harm to be done to Will without severe consequences befalling whoever dared to enact them. Will was a god who had one follower so devout they would not allow such desecration, such disrespect, such blasphemy to go unaddressed.

Hannibal continued cooking, hoping this meal would offer Will another source of comfort and grounding, to bring him back to himself. Will had been distant and distracted, likely dissociating more than he was admitting to Hannibal. He could feign normal conversation, and would appear normal to anyone other than Hannibal, or perhaps Beverly Katz. Hannibal could see that Will was not entirely present for nearly any amount of time during the day, and

nothing he did could bring Will back. Will only seemed to react to anger and pain right now. Hannibal hoped to change that with his gift.

And a dinner of food he knew Will found particularly comforting. While it was not the healthiest meal, Hannibal knew the value of nostalgia when it came to mental healing. Fried chicken, mashed potatoes and gravy was a meal Will had once expressed a fondness for, and Hannibal was only too eager to please if it would help in this case.

It was really chicken, of course. Hannibal doubted Will was in the mood for any of his usual games. Soon, if all went well, but not tonight.

Hannibal was just serving food onto a plate for Will when the man himself padded back down the stairs in his bare feet.

Will entered the kitchen with a towel around his shoulders, his hair damp and his torso gloriously bare for Hannibal's appreciative gaze. He was wearing a pair of flannel pajama bottoms, and nothing else. If Hannibal had not known better, he might have thought Will had meant to seduce him tonight.

"You must have done something to make me mad, if you're cooking comfort food," Will said, and there was a hint of his usual snark, and a sparkle in his eye. It gave Hannibal hope for the night ahead. "You'd best tell me what you've done before I find out on my own, or else things are liable to get ugly."

Hannibal smiled, giving Will his best feign of innocence, knowing that was what Will wanted from him. He handed the plate to his beautiful partner, taking the towel from his shoulders and letting his fingers brush the damp curls by Will's ears.

"Whatever do you mean?" Hannibal asked, "I am not allowed to cook something I know you will like for no reason? I must have done something wicked?"

Will raised an eyebrow, smelling the chum Hannibal was tossing in the water. He was curious, and he looked like he was more himself than he had been in over a week.

"You are the definition of wicked," Will said, setting his plate on the counter and picking up a fork of the potatoes, "if this isn't an apology, I dread to think what it might be."

Hannibal smiled, and before he had even opened his mouth to reply to Will, their guest in the basement groaned in pain again. Will's eyes flashed, and he was once more the beautiful monster Hannibal had fallen in love with upon first glimpsing. All at once, Will was himself again.

Will hummed around his bite of food, clearly enjoying it. That caused a swell of pride in Hannibal, though he brushed it aside. This was all for Will, to help him heal and to allow him to find justice for the sins committed against him.

"I think I see now, Doctor Lecter," Will said, setting down his fork and stepping toward where Hannibal was standing near the pantry door, "this isn't an apology. It's a gift. Who did you bring as an offering to me?"

Hannibal had never felt more in love than this moment, and he was nearly breathless with his want. He had not realized how numb he had felt in the absence of Will's true self. Now, faced with the bare beast, he was overcome with awe.

"You know who it is, Will," he said softly, unable to put much strength to the words as he was held by Will's gaze, "I would only bring you one person at a time like this. The one who has hurt you."

Will's eyes flashed again, and he was at the pantry door in a flash. Hannibal was left to follow him down into the basement, unwilling to miss a moment of Will's righteous anger.

Will was standing over the restrained man, still as a hunting lion. The man on the table stared up at Will with confusion and fear, uncomprehending of just how he would suffer under the hands of the man he had hurt. Hannibal would watch for the moment he realized just how grave of a mistake he had made, and every moment of his punishment afterwards.

"You did it," Will said, his voice so quiet Hannibal had to step closer to catch the words, "all of my life that you destroyed. You don't even understand what you've done. If you had the slightest inkling, you would have thought twice before you struck the first match."

Hannibal felt a thrill down his spine at the pure venom in Will's voice, and the cold rage behind the words.

Will slowly walked around the table, surveying all the implements Hannibal had set out for his use. His eyes were critical and sharp, direct and purposeful. He was entirely present in this moment, more real and himself than he had been since the fire. Hannibal's plan had worked, and he had gotten Will back. Will was here, now, and Hannibal was about to witness him kill this man by himself.

Will was glorious.

Will looked up and met Hannibal's eyes, and something dark flashed in his gaze.

"You found him that quick?" Will asked, "and you're sure you didn't leave a trace? Having the FBI suspect either of us for this one would be problematic."

Hannibal smiled, more than pleased with how Will was reacting.

"If you wish to display him, we may find it difficult to avoid scrutiny. I suspect you have other plans which will end with him being a missing person, and suspected to have fled after committing an arson targeting a public figure."

Will grinned, and it was a feral expression that cast Hannibal's mind back to the story Will had told him of the rabid dog Will's father had shot when he was young. Hannibal imagined this was the way the dog had looked up at Will from under the tree, waiting for him to come down so the canine could attack.

"That sounds about right," Will said, then turned back to the man on the table, "you're just the kind of coward to run away after getting up the courage to do the kind of idiotic damage

you did.”

The man on the table trembled, tears flowing from his eyes.

Chapter End Notes

I think we're getting close to wrapping this one up, folks. A few more chapters and we'll have our happy ending. At least I think so. Things don't always go as I plan. Fingers crossed.

I hope you enjoyed this chapter!

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Will's design for this man was not as clear cut as what he had done for Freddie Lounds. Will had not had as much time to plan, and this kill was fueled by more rage and anger than he had felt for Lounds. Because it would never be found, Will didn't have to worry about how it ended up looking, or evidence being left behind.

The bare stretch of Will's shoulders was enticing as the muscles flexed under his skin, but Hannibal didn't dare interrupt him. His eyes were dark with focus and his hands were steady in his rage.

"You know, I think I've got an idea for a story," Will mused casually, his nimble fingers plucking a scalpel from the tray, "It could turn into another novel, but I think maybe I'll keep it mostly to myself. Wouldn't want to give anyone any more fuel to bother me."

Hannibal didn't respond, recognizing that Will was speaking more to himself than to him. He was entirely engrossed in his work, and Hannibal was privileged to be witness to it. The man who had hurt Will so egregiously was suffering, and Hannibal was glad of it. He would keep the man alive to suffer Will's punishment as long as Will wished and he was able.

Will's hands cut through flesh, taking cuts as Hannibal had taught him, so intent in his task that he likely didn't realize it when he began talking to himself under his breath. He was planning out a story. One he would write, but never publish. This story would be too revealing should he let it reach the public.

Hannibal wondered if Will would let him read it. He would feel blessed to be given such a gift, but he would not expect it. Despite how blurred the lines between them had become, there were still parts of himself that Will didn't share all the time. There were things that made Will unique, and Hannibal would not demand those of him. Each piece of trust was hard earned and carefully kept.

Blood dripped onto the floor, a soft sound as steady as a metronome. Will's speech kept cadence with the sound, creating a melody Hannibal could lose himself to.

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Seeing Jack Crawford on the front step wasn't a surprise, though Will did find some dark amusement at seeing him there. He had no way of knowing that he was making things much easier for Hannibal and Will by doing so.

"Agent Crawford," Will said warily, glancing around as if he expected there to be more agents and FBI vehicles around, "What can I do for you?"

Jack shook his head. He looked bad, like he hadn't been sleeping well. Will would almost call him haggard. He had a wild and desperate look in his eyes. This too made Will's job easier.

"You know I'm not here in an official capacity," he said, "I'm off the case and I'm here on my own. I just want to know that I'm right. Tell me. I know you have something to do with the murders."

Will frowned.

"Jack, my house was set on fire. Probably because someone else thinks the way you do. Right now isn't the right time to be asking me this. You should know better."

Jack was frustrated.

"If you did what I think you did, you deserved it," he said, "You're a killer."

Will shook his head. Rage settled cold in his stomach, hearing Jack say something like that. The pain of losing his home hadn't gone away, and Jack was stupid to say such a thing right to his face. Especially if he believed Will was a killer. It just proved the games they had been playing with the Agent had been wreaking havoc on his psyche, and he was losing his grip on reality. Just like Will wanted.

"Goodbye, Jack," he said, "I'm calling Kramer."

Will shut the door and turned to see Hannibal standing there. Hannibal was smiling and clearly amused by what he had just witnessed.

"The show must go on," Hannibal said with a smirk.

Will shrugged.

"It's a good plan. I don't see any reason not to follow through. Especially when he's making it this easy."

Hannibal hummed in agreement as Will pulled out his phone and dialed the agent in charge of the case.

"Mr. Graham?" Kramer asked, sounding concerned, but mostly curious, "is everything alright?"

"No, everything is not alright," Will said, adding tension to his voice that made it sound like he was on the verge of tears from either fear or frustration, "Jack Crawford is on my front porch, and he's asking me questions. He won't leave me alone. Why would you let him do that?"

"He's what?" Kramer asked, and Will heard the sounds of him standing abruptly from his chair, knocking something over as he did, "I assure you, Mr. Graham, he is not there on orders of anyone here."

Will almost laughed, but instead let his voice waver with emotion when he spoke again.

"Can't you stop him? I just want to be left alone. I don't know why you're doing this to me."

Kramer cursed and pulled the phone away from his ear to begin calling orders.

“Mr. Graham, I’m sending agents over right now to pick him up. I’ll be sure he doesn’t bother you again. Where are you again?”

Will winked at Hannibal, who was watching with the same avid fascination he would afford an opera.

“I’m at Doctor Lecter’s house, since someone set mine on fire. Why is everyone doing this to me? I just want to be left alone. I never hurt anyone.”

While Will hated how pathetic he must sound to the other man, it was kind of fun to manipulate him this easily. This must be how Hannibal felt all the time, whenever he was dealing with regular people.

“Mr. Graham, I promise I will take care of this. I apologize for this. I have to go.”

Kramer ended the call, and Will gave into his urge to laugh. Hannibal raised an eyebrow, then stepped over to peek through the window.

“Jack Crawford is still here,” he mused, “It seems the stress and humiliation of his position have caused him to lose all sense. I almost regret doing this to him.”

Will rolled his eyes.

“You never feel bad about playing games with people,” he said, sidling up beside Hannibal to peek out, “Seems a shame to start now.”

Hannibal huffed softly.

“I regret the harm I did to you,” he said, “I had never intended the FBI to harass you as they do and have done. And I do feel responsibility for what has happened to your home.”

Will hummed.

“That’s fair,” he said, “and don’t think I’ve completely forgiven you for all the games you played, either. You’re on thin ice.”

Hannibal smiled, pressing a kiss to Will’s temple.

“Of course. Though, I do have a gift that I hope will begin to make up for my trespasses.”

Will looked up at Hannibal with a curious expression, his brow lifted in question.

Hannibal took Will’s hand and led him into the study, excited to show Will what he had been up to in the past weeks. It had taken some work, and a lot of searching, but he was pleased with what he had found.

“Oh my god,” Will said, a grin spreading on his face, “are these the exact ones I had?”

Hannibal nodded.

“While they are old, they are not entirely rare as of yet. I went to every antique store in Baltimore in search of the exact models you had. I know they are not the same, sentimentality wise, but it was something I could do that I hope you will appreciate.”

Will laughed softly and sat at the desk, running his fingers over the keys of the typewriter before turning to the record player and turning it on. He watched as the record began to spin, playing a slow waltz. The record was one of Hannibal’s, as he hadn’t yet been able to replace the collection Will had possessed, but the look on Will’s face said it didn’t matter.

“If I wasn’t already in love with you, Doctor Lecter,” Will said, “I would be lost on you now. I bet even Beverly doesn’t know the exact model of typewriter I had. They weren’t even that sentimental to me either, since I just found most of it at rummage sales. I didn’t get left anything by someone that died, or anything. So these are just as good. Almost better. God, I love you so much.”

Hannibal was pleased.

Will stood up and kissed Hannibal, sliding his hands into Hannibal’s hair and holding him there. Hannibal set his hands on Will’s hips and pulled him close, but they were interrupted by a knock on the front door.

“I believe that will be Agent Kramer,” Hannibal breathed softly when they parted, “you called, and he came.”

Will sighed.

“How accommodating,” he said, “I guess we should go deal with that. We can finish this conversation later.”

Hannibal grinned.

“Anything you wish, Will,” he said.

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Agent Kramer was on the stoop, looking slightly out of breath and entirely displeased. Hannibal couldn't say that was unjustified, given there was a group of agents escorting Jack Crawford away in a manner just shy of an arrest.

Will was careful to appear frazzled and frightened for the Agent's benefit, and Hannibal admired his cleverness in all things.

"Mister Graham, please accept my most sincere apologies, again," Kramer said, desperate for this not to turn into a huge scandal for the FBI, "I guarantee Jack Crawford will not bother you again."

Will offered a skeptical smile.

"I hope you'll forgive me if I don't entirely believe that," Will said wryly, "you haven't proved that you can control him yet. I hope you're right, though."

Kramer nodded, glancing at Hannibal as if he might offer some kind of help. Hannibal didn't, finding it far more amusing to watch the man squirm in the face of Will's manipulations.

"If I have my way, Jack Crawford will lose his badge. I was considering asking Catherine Meadows to help me with that. Unofficially, of course."

Hannibal could see a spark of delight in Will's eyes, though he immediately tore them down to look at his shoes. Probably to stop Kramer from seeing it as well.

"I hope Agent Crawford can get the help he needs," Will said meekly, "I think the stress of his job has really gotten to him."

Kramer nodded, agreeing readily to whatever Will said.

"I'll make sure that's strongly recommended," Kramer said, "he'll be too busy trying to fix everything he's done, and he won't have time to bother you again. I promise you that, Mister Graham."

Will nodded, then, as if as an after thought, began searching his own pockets.

"Because I know she will jump at the chance, take this," Will said, producing a slightly creased business card, "here's Catherine's card. You make sure to ask her for her help. She's got a bee in her bonnet already."

Kramer accepted the card, albeit begrudgingly. Hannibal would be curious to see if he did actually call her, or if all of this was just to make Will like him.

"Just so you know, Mister Graham, we're pretty sure we know who it was who set fire to your home."

Will lifted his eyebrows.

“Really?”

Kramer nodded,

“Looks like he’s on the run or hiding, but we’ll find him. I promise.”

Will smiled wryly.

“That’s two promises from you in one day,” he pointed out, “I hope the stress of trying to fulfill them doesn’t make you end up like Agent Crawford.”

Kramer offered his own, nervous smile.

“Don’t you worry about that, sir,” he said, “You just try to enjoy the rest of your day. Again, I apologize for all of this.”

Will nodded, his shoulders slumping, and appearing incredibly exhausted. Even Hannibal, who was aware of the ruse, felt a pang of sympathy. He placed an arm around Will’s waist and pulled him close.

“I just want this all to be over,” Will said, “ thank you, Agent.”

Once the door was shut, the FBI firmly on the other side, Will began to shake with silent laughter. Hannibal led him further into the house, aware that there may still be agents outside who might hear them.

Once in the kitchen, Will put a hand over his eyes and laughed aloud, the sound ringing around the room and making Hannibal smile.

“They’re all so stupid,” Will laughed, “I never realized how easy it would actually be to get the entire FBI wrapped around my finger, even turning them against one of their own.”

Hannibal huffed his own, much more subdued laugh.

“You may have to make some amendments to a few of your novels, with this new perspective you have,” he said.

Will laughed harder, falling into one of the chairs at the table. He looked to be recovered from his dark mood, which Hannibal was grateful for. While the pain of losing so much of his home and belongings would linger for a long time, Hannibal believed they were past the worst of it.

Eventually, Will calmed down. He was practically glowing from his good mood, and Hannibal itched to draw him.

“You know, I think I want to write,” Will said, and the way he said it was different.

His compulsion to be writing every second of every day had seemed to dwindle in the past while, and Hannibal had noticed. He had thought it likely Will had felt less full to bursting with thought because he had been able to talk so freely with Hannibal all the time, and his days had been full of more things. He no longer had to keep alarms to remind him to eat, because he was usually with Hannibal, who loved feeding him enough he refused to let him forget a single meal.

At least, Hannibal hoped all these good things in Will's life were the reason he had not been writing as feverishly as he used to. He surely hoped there was nothing wrong that was causing the change in behavior.

Wouldn't it be somewhat bittersweet to learn that curing Will of his numb and depressive state had caused his mind to no longer desire to write the beautiful horror that had brought them together. That would be the complete antithesis of what Hannibal had wanted, but he would have to accept it as a sign of mental improvement.

"I'm going to write about fire," Will said, grinning, "I think I've got my next book, and it's already fixin' to be one of the best yet. I'm ready to give some people nightmares."

Hannibal was pleased. He was sure it would be wonderful, and he was excited to read what his beautiful mind came up with. He wondered how the FBI would react to learning Will was writing a book about fire after having his house set ablaze.

Perhaps they would be relieved he was writing it after the fact, and not before.

Hannibal wanted to take Will to Florence, and show him the great beauty of the world. He hoped Will would agree to a trip like that. Though Will did not travel much, Hannibal had an idea it was mostly due to not being comfortable doing so on his own. Hopefully, Will would enjoy such a thing with Hannibal.

—

The sound of the typewriter was rhythmic and somewhat hypnotizing, lulling Hannibal into a comfortable, slow state of mind. Will was entirely absorbed by the story he was writing, and was likely unaware of Hannibal's presence entirely.

That was fine with Hannibal, as he was enjoying this chance to observe Will in his natural state.

Hannibal was working on a sketch of Will, and the fact that he was holding nearly still was beneficial to the effort. Will was likely unaware of how many times Hannibal had drawn him. It had not been relevant to the things going on in their life. Hannibal wondered how Will would react to the truth in this matter.

From the day Hannibal had first set eyes on Will Graham in person, that stranger behind thick rimmed glasses, he had sketched Will at least once for every time he saw him. As Will had become more comfortable and happy in his own skin, his sketches had reflected the change, showing him with a smile, a spark in his eyes, and entirely at ease. AS the darkness had been

given room to grow within him, the sketches had shown the anger and the fire, the beast behind his eyes.

Now, Hannibal was pleased to think Will was entirely himself, no longer at war with any of his impulses and desires. The man and the monster were one and the same, and Will had never been more beautiful.

All at once, the clacking of keys came to a halt, and Hannibal looked up to find that Will was staring at him curiously.

“Are you drawing me?” Will asked when he realized he had Hannibal’s attention.

Hannibal nodded, leaning forward to offer the open notebook to Will for inspection. Will accepted it with clear interest, studying the image of himself at the desk.

“Do you draw me often?” Will asked, looking up from the book, “I get the feeling that you do, and I really should have asked about it earlier.”

Hannibal smiled, gesturing to the book in Will’s hands.

“You are welcome to see for yourself,” Hannibal offered, “I am not disappointed that you have not asked before. There have been many things vying for your attention.”

Will laughed softly, flipping back through the previous pages of the sketchbook. They did not all show Will, though most of them did. Scattered through were a few sketches of buildings and crime scenes. Whatever had struck Hannibal’s fancy. There were even a few sketches of things from Will’s books, characters or moments Hannibal had found particularly striking. He was curious to hear Will’s thoughts on it all, but he was content to be patient, allowing Will to look his fill before discussing what he saw.

“If I didn’t already know you’re absolutely obsessed with me, I guess now I have the proof. As if I needed more. Do you have multiple of these? I bet you do.”

Hannibal offered a slight shrug, pleased that Will found it amusing. He had wondered, and worried a bit that Will would find it intrusive. Hannibal supposed they were somewhat past that at this point.

“I have a few,” Hannibal agreed, “though this one has most of my depictions of you. Easier to cover up that way, if it was ever necessary.”

Will laughed.

“You are stupidly smart sometimes, and just the sappiest romantic at others. I can’t even tell which one you are right now. You’re probably both.”

“Would you like to go to Florence, Will?” Hannibal asked, “Once we have finished with Jack Crawford and his mess. We can bring Andromache, and anything else you want.”

Will frowned, but not because he was unhappy. It was a thoughtful expression. One that he only wore when he was surprised by a question.

Hannibal allowed him a moment to consider it. He would allow him all the time in the world to think about it, if that was what Will needed. It was not an urgent topic that must be addressed quickly. They were not on the run and trying to decide where they would hide. It was a leisure trip, and they could take their time to plan it.

“Sure,” Will said at length, “let’s plan on it. It sounds fun, as long as I’m with you. I probably won’t be forced to talk to anyone, at least. I don’t think I’m as popular over there, and I don’t know italian.”

Hannibal grinned. He was pleased.

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“Mister Graham?”

Will turned to face Kramer, morphing his face into an expression of confused concern. If he was right, then this meant Hannibal could start booking flights and hotel rooms. Or, whatever his fancy ass wanted to pay for. Will was willing to just go with it.

“Agent Kramer,” Will said slowly, as if not sure how to take this sudden appearance. Will was waiting for Beverly in the parking lot outside the FBI building where she worked. They were going to have lunch together. “What can I do for you?”

Kramer ran a hand over his greying hair, clearly not pleased to be having to bother Will again. After everything the poor author had been through, this was just one more thing he would have to deal with.

“Are you familiar with a Doctor Chilton?” he asked at length, and Will knew he was hoping he would say no.

Will frowned.

“Yeah,” he said, “Fredrick Chilton is one of my less annoying stalkers. Has been for a while, and recently he started showing up again. Why?”

Kramer pinched the bridge of his nose and shook his head. This was going to be a headache. Will knew that, and he had to stop himself from smiling about it.

“In your opinion, could Doctor Chilton ever become violent or dangerous?” he asked.

Will widened his eyes as if in horror, angling his body away from Kramer. He could see the way Kramer winced at his reaction. He had probably been hoping to keep this from getting dramatic. Didn’t want a whole to do made of it.

But that wasn’t what Will or Hannibal wanted.

“Do you think he had something to do with all the murders?” Will asked, hating how stupid he sounded. Like he didn’t understand how things worked.

Kramer sighed.

“We have reason to suspect him,” he said reluctantly, “he has contacted Agent Crawford a few times, and they seem to have been at times right before Crawford acted… unwisely.”

Will was thrilled by this. He had known Chilton had probably tried to bother Jack, but he had expected him to get dragged into this by his connections with Freddie Lounds. This was better, and even easier.

“I never would have thought he would go that far,” Will said, pouring so much earnestness into his voice he nearly choked on it, “but do you really think he could have hurt someone?”

Kramer shook his head again.

“I don’t know yet. We’re looking into him. If you have records of the times he’s tried to contact you, or you can get them, that might help us. I’m sorry to bother you with it.”

Will shook his own head.

“I’d be more than happy to help you. I’ve said from the beginning that I just want this person caught. If it’s Chilton, or if you can find him by looking into Chilton, then I’ll help in any way I can. I’m sure I can get those records for you.”

Kramer offered a tired smile. Will wondered how long he would last in this job. This case was wearing on him, and he hadn’t even been on it very long. Maybe Kramer would retire after this, claiming the copy-write killer as the crowning jewel of his career. They wouldn’t even know that it had ever been the Ripper. Hannibal could go on doing what he had always done before Will, and they would never know the difference.

Will could imagine the conspiracy theorists online would have a heyday if anyone ever noticed the similarities between the Ripper murders and the Copy-write murders. That the copy-write killer had been active during a Ripper down period.

But that wouldn’t happen for years yet. Will and Hannibal would be happy and comfortable together by then, a life built just for the two of them. Nothing would be able to stop them.

“Thank you, Mister Graham. I hope you have a nice rest of your day.”

Will nodded, and at once was jumped from behind as Beverly finally emerged.

“Will! I hope big bad Agent Kramer hasn’t been scaring you too badly. You should get an attack dog to keep everyone away from you.”

Will smiled, watching as Kramer backed up a few steps with a nervous grin. Beverly scared him in some way, it seemed. Probably, she had been fierce in her defense of Will, and had made everyone wary of upsetting her.

“See you later, Agent Kramer,” Will said, and the man gratefully took his leave.

“I swear, if my bosses don’t stop harassing you, I’m going to have to quit because I guess the problem is me,” Beverly said, pulling away and stepping back to look Will over, “you look good, though. I guess Hannibal has been taking care of you. A man like that won’t let you dig yourself into the pit of despair.”

Will laughed softly.

“Hannibal has been helping me a lot,” he said, “I don’t know what I would do without him. Where do you want to eat?”

Beverly grinned and began chatting about the different places she might want to eat as they got in the car. Will smiled amiably, only half listening as his mind considered parts of the plan he and Hannibal had yet to fully realize. He also knew he would probably not like whatever they ended up eating very much. Hannibal had ruined him in that respect.

He supposed Hannibal had ruined him in many respects.

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“Kramer is on the trail,” Will said, handing Hannibal the slices of meat he had just finished with, “just like we wanted. He’s quick. We need to finish with Chilton’s house before he gets a warrant. I think it’ll be about a week after I give him the phone records, if he makes his case well, which I think he will.”

Hannibal smiled and kissed Will on the nose, like one of those stupidly sweet couples that made everyone feel slightly nauseated around them. Will wondered if Hannibal wanted them to be like that around others. He wouldn’t put it past him. No one ever expected couples like that to be killers. Unless they did. God knew some killers ended up being couples like that.

Hannibal seemed to enjoy being sappy sometimes. Especially if it would make others feel uncomfortable.

“We are nearly finished, my dear. Soon, you shall not have a worry in the world.”

Will scoffed and shook his head.

“As if,” he said, “but I appreciate everything you’re doing to minimize the problems in my life. Do you have any idea how long it would take to eliminate all of them? Your body count would double.”

Hannibal flashed a grin as he began cooking the meat, sizzling filling the air along with the thick scents of good food.

“You do not know how many people I have killed, dearest.”

“And you don’t know how many stalkers I have, *darling* .”

Hannibal paused, and Will saw emotions war across his face. He was amused by the banter, but completely unhappy about the fact that Will was dealing with the attention of so many people who were not him. Hannibal was jealous that he was not Will’s only acolyte, and he wanted to kill all the others. But Will wasn’t likely to give him all their names and let him. Not at this juncture. It would send them back far too many steps now, and Will didn’t want that. He wanted to have the chance to take their vacation in Italy like Hannibal wanted.

Will didn’t want anything to get in the way of them being happy.

“I see,” Hannibal said, and Will huffed a laugh.

“Maybe, if you can behave in Italy, I’ll let you hunt a few of them down when we get home. Until then, you’ll just have to deal with the fact that you’re not the only crazy in my life.

Alright?”

And, just to spite him, Will kissed Hannibal on the cheek. A parody of those sickening couples Will had always loathed to the point of actively writing gruesome deaths for them into his novels. He genuinely hated seeing people act to smitten with each other, and it killed a part of him to think he had become that.

But, if it would make Hannibal happy, even a little bit, he supposed he could make that sacrifice every so often.

“Very well,” Hannibal said, as if he was feeling put upon, “but I shall hold you to that when we return. Please sort them by most discourteous, and I shall deal with them as discretely as possible in order to spare you the inconvenience of the FBI’s scrutiny.”

Will shook his head, but he was smiling.

“I’m going to the study for a bit. Let me know when dinner’s ready.”

Hannibal hummed his agreement, and Will headed to the study.

He put one of Hannibal’s records on the player and sat at the typewriter. This story was going well, and Will thought he would have the first draft ready by the time they left for Italy. He could work it up and send it in while they were gone, if Hannibal allowed him the time to do it. It could be published by the time they got back, if he worked quick.

Andy padded into the study and settled at Will’s feet with a heavy sigh, as if she had responsibilities that she felt exhausted by. Will smiled and set his hands on the keys.

Fire licked at the corners of his mind as he worked. He was consumed by the flame, and he let it pour out through his fingers, transferring to the page.

He had an idea quite a few people would gain the fear of their houses catching fire after this one was released. He was secretly pleased by that, the idea that he could affect a large group of people in that way. Making them feel an ounce of what he did, just through the power of suggestion. They chose to read what he wrote, and he planted ideas that changed how they viewed the world.

Freddie Lounds might have been onto something, though he would never have let her learn that. And he still resented the idea that he would cause anyone to be evil.

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Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Hannibal brought their plates of food into the study, knowing Will would be working there and wouldn't want to stop to eat. While it was a habit Hannibal had been trying to discourage, he couldn't help but feel endeared by the way Will was so consumed by his work that he neglected his other needs. Hannibal would let him eat at the desk tonight.

Andromache was curled up and dozing at Will's feet as Benny Goodman played on the record player. Despite the jovial sound of the music, Hannibal could see the darkness in Will's mind, writhing in his skull like the tendrils of a great beast.

He was the most beautiful thing Hannibal had ever seen.

Hannibal set the plate beside Will's typewriter, pressing a kiss to the top of his head and glancing at the page that was nearly full with words now.

Will's use of language was unmatched, where Hannibal was concerned. He did not believe anyone else in the world had such a command of the words of the english language. Even in other languages, Hannibal knew of no writer that could manipulate the minds of the readers with such authority and elegance.

Hannibal could almost feel the heat from the fire emanating from the page as Will came to the end and pulled it free.

Hannibal caught Will's hand and pressed a kiss to his wrist, worshiping his god in every way he could.

Will blinked and looked at Hannibal, his gaze clearing as he surfaced from the world he had created.

“I have brought you dinner,” Hannibal said softly, “If you can take a moment to nourish yourself, I would be grateful.”

Will huffed a laugh. His eyes were sparkling with warm affection, and Hannibal felt blessed to be the object of his god's love. His mind was soothed by the knowledge that no other follower had been given this response from their deity.

“You don't mind me eating in here?” Will asked, though it was clear he already knew the answer, “You usually make us eat in the dining room together.”

Hannibal hummed pleasantly, just basking in Will's attention. Still, he found it difficult to believe that he was allowed to have Will in this way, and every way.

“You inspire change in me, my dear. I would not want to interrupt the flow of your work. If I have not already interrupted it.”

Will smiled.

“Only a little. Are you going to eat in here as well?” he asked, eyeing the other plate that Hannibal had set on the table beside the couch, “Just watch me work?”

Hannibal took his seat, raising an eyebrow in challenge.

“Of course.”

Will chuffed and shook his head, but didn’t say anything else as he pulled a fresh sheet of paper into the typewriter. He began typing again, though he stopped frequently to eat small portions of his food.

Hannibal did watch, pleased by the way Will clearly enjoyed the food while he was almost entirely distracted by his work. It was one thing to feed his victims to an unknowing audience, and entirely another to feed Will, who knew and accepted every part of him. Will accepted it so wholly he no longer felt the need to make a big deal out of the meals Hannibal made. While Hannibal had always given his food some level of reverence, he wasn’t at all offended by the casual way Will ate. Will rightfully thought of it as nothing more than meat, and treated it as such.

What a strange pair they made. Hannibal, who would be labeled a sadistic psychopath, yet valued lives and kindness with the utmost respect, and Will, who could transpose the mentality and emotions of any other onto his own mind, yet could be more cold and cruel than anyone.

They were identically different.

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“I always told Will that Chilton was trouble, and he should try for a restraining order against him,” Beverly said, “I never thought it would go this far, and I never thought Chilton was the kind of guy to go around killing people, but it just goes to show you never know a guy, right? Will should have listened to me, but he almost never does.”

Hannibal nodded, smiling politely. Beverly had been in a state of excitement ever since Fredrick Chilton had been arrested on suspicion of being the copy-write killer. She had been fervent in her study of the evidence, and gave Will and Hannibal both frequent updates. Now that the FBI was certain they had the right man, she had proposed they celebrate.

“I listen to you when it matters,” Will objected, taking a long drink of his whiskey, “I just never put much thought into my stalkers. They didn’t seem to matter enough to worry about.”

Hannibal huffed and pressed a kiss to the top of Will’s head and ordered himself an old fashioned. While he was not the type to go to bars, typically, Will had asked him to humor Beverly, so they were here. The atmosphere was lively, and not nearly as raucous as it might have been. Hannibal was enjoying himself because Will was enjoying himself.

"And now you know that I was right, but it doesn't matter. He's going away forever, and we don't have to worry about him ever again. I still can't believe Jack ever got tangled up with him, but I guess the job just got to him after all these years. He's facing the consequences now, and I feel bad. But enough about that. I hear you two are planning a trip to Europe?"

Hannibal grinned.

"Will has allowed me to convince him, yes," he said, nearly giddy with all the things he hoped to do with Will and show him when they were in Italy, "I spent my formative years in Italy, and I want to share it with him."

Beverly laughed softly, giving Will a glance. Will ignored her, the way only best friends could get away with without being in danger of offending the other party.

"Well, I'm sure you'll both have a lot of fun," Beverly said, "Will's never been out of the country before, so you'll have to show him the ropes, but he learns quickly. Just make sure and come back, because I won't ever forgive you if you just run away together without telling me. Even if you tell me first, I'll still chew your ass out for abandoning me."

Will snorted.

"I'm pretty sure you wouldn't let me leave the country if you thought I wasn't coming back," he said, "I wouldn't put it past you to use your connections in the FBI to get me put on a no fly list just out of spite."

Beverly pointed a finger at Will, grinning.

"That's not a bad idea. I could put out an APB on your ass. But then I guess I'd be acting like a crazy stalker, huh."

Hannibal huffed a soft laugh.

"Then I suppose we must not push you to such extreme measures," he said amiably, "and I have no intention of stealing Will from you. At least not yet. I only wish to monopolize some of his time, before I will return him."

Beverly nodded thoughtfully.

"We could draw up a schedule," she said, a mischievous glint in her eye, "alternate weeks."

Will scowled.

"You are *not* talking about sharing custody of me with my boyfriend," he said sharply, "you're not my divorced parents. You're making this way more weird than it needs to be, Bev, and I am officially uncomfortable."

Will downed the rest of his drink and set the glass on the counter.

Will's face was flushed from the alcohol, and he was glowing in the low lights of the bar. He was beautiful, and Hannibal felt his chest swell with affection for him. He leaned in close to

whisper in Will's ear.

"I do not share well, Will. Beverly will likely have to fight me for your time when we return."

Will rolled his eyes.

"Yeah, well at least she's getting started now. You guys are suffocating. Let's go home."

So they did.

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"Come on, doll," Will pleaded, "you know it's for your own good. It's not gonna hurt you. Please?"

Hannibal chuckled. He had thought, in this area, Will could do no wrong. He had never struggled at all before now, and to see him at such a loss was genuinely amusing.

"She knows that her compliance means you will be separated," Hannibal said, watching as Will tried desperately to get Andromache to take the sedative for the flight.

Will shot Hannibal a withering look.

"You're not exactly helping," he pointed out, "just standing there and grinning. You're encouraging her poor behavior."

Hannibal sighed heavily, though he was still smiling. He seemed to always be smiling these days, unable to help but feel pleased whenever he was with Will. He bent down to face the dog and held her gaze.

"You must do as Will says, young lady," he said sternly, noting as Will rolled his eyes.

"As if," Will mumbled, but tried again and finally got Andy to swallow the pill.

"Fine," Will sad, standing back up, "it worked. But if you get all smug about this then I'll ignore you for the first whole day we're in Florence."

Hannibal smiled benignly.

"I feel offended that you would consider me smug," he said, "and I think you were the reason she finally conceded. It had nothing at all to do with me."

Will huffed.

"Sure," he said, and they finally made their way.

"I love you, Will," Hannibal said, taking Will's hand in his own and smiling warmly.

Will softened, offering his own smile at last.

“I love you too.”

“Are you Will Graham?”

They both turned to see a young man, holding a slightly worn copy of Typhoid and Swans. His eyes were wide, and there was a flush on his cheeks that showed he was nervous about approaching Will.

“Yes,” Will said, putting on his pubic face, the one he always used for his fans, “did you want me to sign your book?”

The young man sagged in relief, nodding energetically as he extended the book.

“I’m Mike, and I love your books. This one was a lot like Icarus Sky, I thought, and that one was my favorite. They’re more philosophical than the others, and I can’t find anyone else who writes like you do.”

Will’s smile turned a shade brighter at this, and Hannibal knew he was pleased by the boy’s comments. It was the way he felt, himself, and he had shared these thoughts with Hannibal before.

Will touched the pen to his tongue briefly before holding it above the title page of the book.

“Any special message?” he asked, meeting the boy’s eyes.

Mike blushed darker under the gaze of the author he adored. Hannibal felt a spark of jealousy, but pushed it aside. Will had no interest in this boy.

“Uh, just whatever you want, Mister Graham. I really can’t say how much I love your books, and I wasn’t expecting to run into you here. Thank you.”

Will nodded and wrote a quick message with his signature before shutting the book and handing it back.

“I’m glad you like my work. It was a pleasure to meet you, Mike.”

The young man nodded again, nearly unable to take his eyes off of Will in his wonder. Hannibal could understand that, and he sympathized with the boy, though he did want to have Will to himself again.

Mike thanked Will repeatedly, eventually walking away with a spring in his step.

Will sighed.

“I really hope that kind of thing won’t happen in Italy,” he said, “I need a break.”

Hannibal laughed. He hadn’t told Will yet, but he knew Will’s books were also quite popular in Italy. He may not escape it as much as he hoped. It may not compare to how it was in the states, but Hannibal was certain he would be recognized by at least a few people during their trip.

Hannibal might wait for the first person to recognize Will before he confessed to this knowledge. Until then, Will could still potentially make them turn back.

“I’m sure everything will be fine,” Hannibal said, “Do you intend to work while we are gone?”

Will grinned and pulled a notebook from his bag, one of the ones Hannibal had bought for him.

“I never stop working, darling. But I’ll try to enjoy myself too.”

“That is all I ask.”

Chapter End Notes

The End!

It's taken me forever to finish this one, which always seems to happen to me T-T Sorry everyone. But I finally did it. Now the question is, should I start posting a new fic, or try to finish another one of my WIPs? Because I am a sucker for posting new, but I know I have a few neglected works that maybe I should get back to.

Anyway, thank you all for reading this. It was fun. <3